

Double Issue

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SCIENCE FICTION®

APRIL/MAY 2015

The New Mother

Eugene Fischer

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Swanwick &
Gregory Frost**

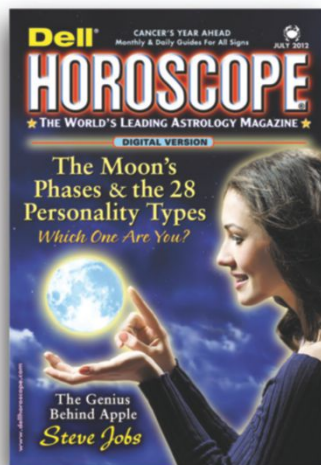
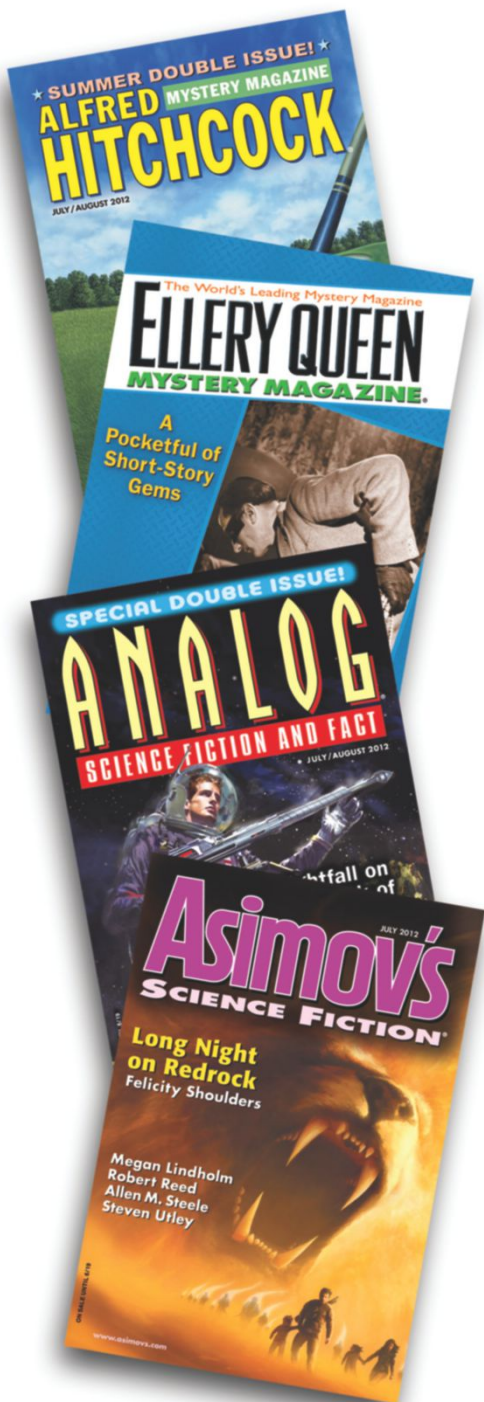
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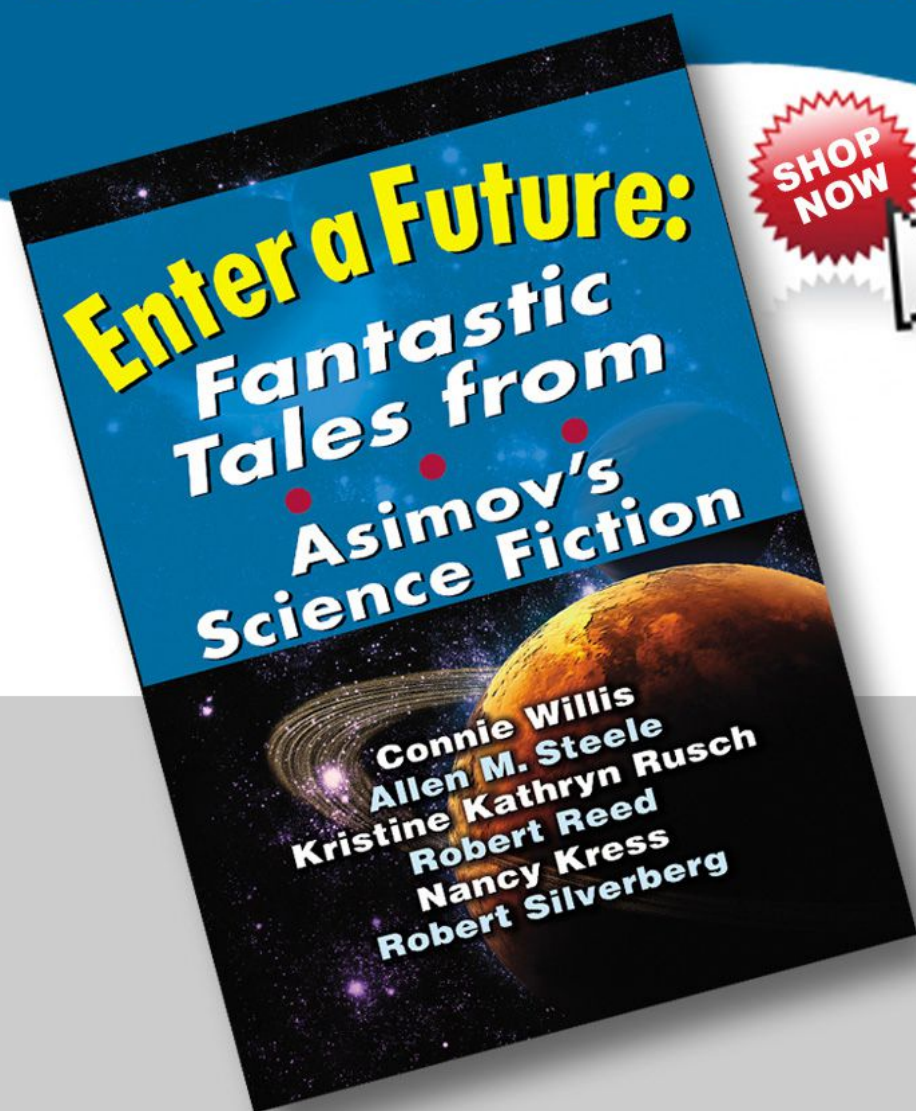
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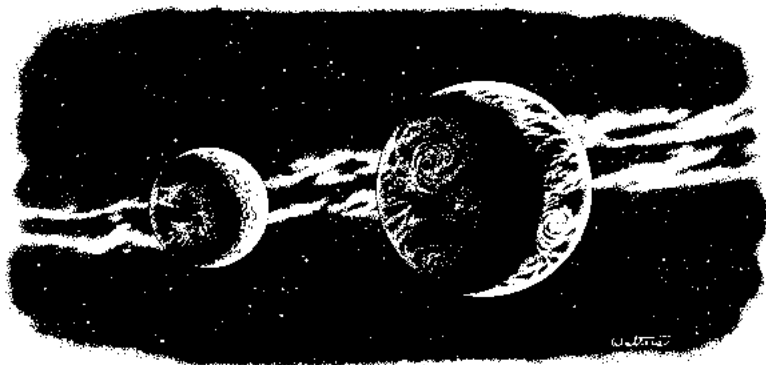
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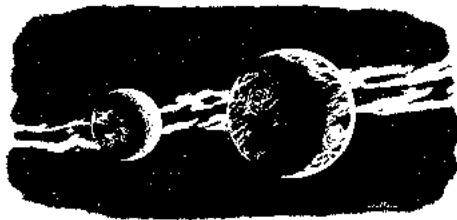


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PHILADELPHIA STORIES

For years, my dad and I spent father/daughter weekends at Philcon, Philadelphia's regional SF convention. The wait for the hotel elevators was often interminable. On one occasion during my early thirties, my intrepid father suggested we use the freight elevator. Alas, it turned out the elevator had been keyed to land in the basement. Once we got there, no amount of cajoling would make it budge. Completely lost, we headed for a broad hallway. I was mortified when we passed in full view of the packed employee cafeteria while trying to find a way out. My father cheered me up by saying, "Just think how much more embarrassed you'd be if you were still a teenager. By the time you're my age an experience like this won't bother you at all." That's one of my Philadelphia stories. Having attended numerous Philcons, plus a Worldcon and a Philadelphia Nebula Awards weekend, been a guest of PSFS, the local science fiction society, and taken a number of personal visits there, I've had time to accumulate plenty. But there are many other science fiction related stories in the City of Brotherly Love. Here are some of them.

Philadelphia has been a nexus for science fiction writers for decades. As many SF readers know, Robert Heinlein, L. Sprague de Camp, and Isaac Asimov all worked at the Philadelphia Navy Yard during the Second World War. While living in Philadelphia, Isaac wrote some of his early *I, Robot* stories as well as "The Wedge" and "The Big and the Little"—two tales that would eventually constitute part of *Foundation*, the first book of his Foundation Trilogy. "Green Fire" a 1998 novella by Eileen Gunn, Andy Duncan, Pat Murphy, and Michael Swanwick, speculates that Robert Heinlein and Isaac Asimov were somehow mixed

up in the mysterious Philadelphia Experiment. My rational mind knows that reports of a teleporting destroyer escort in the Philadelphia shipyard were a hoax. Yet, the fiction editor portion acknowledges that to have two of the greatest SF writers of all time present in that same shipyard during the same era is a remarkable coincidence.

Michael Swanwick set his first novel, *In the Drift*, in Philadelphia. The 1997 book was an Ace Special that took place on the edge of a fallout zone. This alternate future is still reeling from the 1979 meltdown at Three-Mile Island that contaminated much of the eastern seaboard. There are mutants and boneseekers, and the Mummies—who currently put on Philly's surreal New Year's Day parade—now govern the city. Gregory Frost's novel *A Pure Cold Light* is set in a dystopic alternate Philadelphia. Tom Purdom's story "A Stranger from a Foreign Ship" borrows heavily from Philadelphia locales for its tale of a traveler mind-hopping via some unsavory characters. This story appeared in our August 2013 issue.

Philadelphia has also exerted its influence on genre films. The aforementioned enigmatic experiment contained enough material for two movies—1984's *The Philadelphia Experiment* and its 1993 sequel *Philadelphia Experiment II*. The post-apocalyptic/time travel movie *12 Monkeys* sets much of its action in a Philadelphia power station and Philly's Eastern State Penitentiary. Philadelphia almost becomes a character in M. Night Shyamalan's spooky film, *The Sixth Sense*. The camera focuses on the city's distinctive red brick throughout the movie and Philadelphia row houses, shops, schools, and churches are all part of the tale.

Philadelphia's sway extends far beyond

fiction writers and moviemakers, however. The city has provided a home for some prominent SF editors. George Scithers, *Asimov's* founding editor, lived in Philadelphia while working on the magazine. My predecessor, the multiple Hugo-award-winning editor Gardner Dozois, also resides there. In the early years, a number of *Asimov's* editorial assistants also lived in Philly. One of them, Darrell Schweitzer, has become a prolific author of short stories and poetry. His 2006 poem "Remembering the Future" was the winner of our annual Readers' Award poll.

In addition to these editors, Philadelphia continues to act like a sun pulling writers into its gravitational field. Tom Purdom must be the science fiction author with the longest current tenure. Although he grew up as a navy brat, Tom put down stakes in Philly about sixty years ago. Michael Swanwick has lived in Philadelphia since the seventies, while Gregory Frost arrived in the eighties. Greg now lives in a nearby suburb, but he continues to participate in Philadelphia's active literary scene. Fran Wilde is a more recent addition to that scene. Her second story for *Asimov's* is appearing in this issue and she has a fantasy trilogy coming out from Tor Books. Other local Philly authors include Susan Casper and E.C. Myers.

I was delighted when I realized that stories by four Philadelphia authors—Michael, Greg, Tom, and Fran—had been drawn into the vortex of *Asimov's* April/May 2015 issue. Much like the arrival of a comet in ancient times, this confluence had to portend a great happening. And so, it appears, it will. This issue goes on sale on newsstands on March 17, 2015. On Saturday, March 28, we'll be holding an event at Philadelphia's Downtown Barnes & Noble. The bookstore is located in Rittenhouse Square at 1805 Walnut Street. The event will start at one P.M. I'll be there along with all four of these authors. We hope that many of you will come to the event as well. Perhaps our time together at B&N will generate some new Philadelphia stories. ○

Editorial: Philadelphia Stories

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PRAISING OR BANNING

John Updike was not only a splendid writer of novels and short stories—he even dabbled in science fiction, with two of his stories getting into the Year’s Best Science Fiction anthology—but was also a first-rate critic. For many years his lengthy essays on other writers’ books appeared in *The New Yorker*; discursive and penetrating pieces in which, more often than not, he fastened upon the work of some fairly obscure writer and brought it forward into well-deserved attention.

The one thing he never did, in these elegant and carefully considered critiques, is hold a book up to scorn. With one very conspicuous exception, Updike’s reviews were always positive ones. In his introduction to *Picked-Up Pieces* (1975), one of his books of collected essays, he set forth his philosophy of reviewing in a few brief maxims (“Review the book, not the reputation” and “Better to praise and share than blame and ban”), and proposed that critics not accept for review books that they were “predisposed to dislike, or committed by friendship to like.”

These may seem like overly soft-hearted rules to those of us who like to sit on the sidelines and watch some polemically minded critic demolish an unworthy novel with ferocious invective. Updike himself at least once was not immune to the temptation to excoriate. He let it be known that he was unable to read Tom Wolfe’s hugely successful *The Bonfire of the Vanities*—“The blatancy of the icy-hearted satire repelled me”—and in a celebrated 1998 review he went after Wolfe’s later novel, *A Man in Full*, calling it “entertainment, not literature, even literature in a modest, aspirant form.” This was only one salvo in a long feud between Wolfe and Updike, growing

out of Wolfe’s hostility for Updike’s beloved *New Yorker* and fed by what even Updike suspected was Updike’s envy of Wolfe’s vast commercial success, which Updike thought stemmed from vulgar pandering to a lowbrow readership. That episode apart, Updike’s reviews were unfailingly informative and generous of spirit. He singled out books worth reading that most of us had never heard of, explained *why* they were worth reading, and sent us off to find and read them: a valuable public service. This, too, had its roots in Updike’s own career; in 1965 a critic named John Aldridge had taken out after one of his earliest novels, *Of the Farm*, and after Updike himself, saying, “He does not have an interesting mind. He does not possess remarkable narrative gifts or a distinguished style. . . . He does not challenge the imagination or stimulate, shock, or educate it. . . . Mr. Updike has nothing to say.” The Aldridge review left scars on the thirty-three-year-old Updike, as well it might, and he resolved thereupon never to inflict such wounds on a fellow practitioner in any criticism he might write himself (a resolution he seems to have waived only in the case of Tom Wolfe).

The science fiction world has had its own celebrated excoriators, and as a young would-be writer and then as a beginning professional I studied their fierce demolitions of our contemporaries with morbid fascination. Both were outstanding SF writers themselves: James Blish, who penned his furious critical essays under the not very carefully concealed pseudonym of William Atheling, Jr., and Damon Knight, who wrote his reviews under his own name. Blish’s essays are collected in two books, *The Issue at Hand* and *More Issues at Hand*, and a fair sample of his approach is this

comment on a 1952 collaborative story: "I can only suggest that both authors—not their story, but the authors themselves—be piled in the middle of the floor and set fire to." As for Knight, whose reviews can be found in the collection *In Search of Wonder*, he was best known for his savage attack on A.E. van Vogt's *The World of Null-A* ("one of the worst allegedly-adult science fiction stories ever published"), but he laid about him in all directions with equal might and main, and it was a rare writer who failed to feel the sting of his whip.

Neither Blish nor Knight was just a mere hatchet-man, of course, and their essays form a valuable compendium not simply of what not to do in writing science fiction, but what goals to strive for. As a fledgling writer myself (who had little to fear from their ferocity, since I was just a beginner), I studied their texts as though they were scripture, and learned an immense amount from them, as well as savoring the satisfying emotion of *schadenfreude* as I read their hearty attacks on X or Y or Z. Eventually, as I entered more fully into my own career, I did a little reviewing myself, and, since I took science fiction Very Seriously (as did, of course, Blish and Knight) I confess that I indulged in a little negative reviewing myself.

I slammed Edgar Rice Burroughs in a 1964 review, calling his work "silly and crude," and, still channeling my inner William Atheling, Jr., spoke of his work as "unmitigated trash, subliterate claptrap hardly worth the time of children," in another. The year before I said of Murray Leinster, a writer I actually admired quite a good deal, that "his inventiveness is outweighed by his repetitious plotting, molecule-deep characterization, and frequent tendency to lapse into a Mother Goose kind of narrative style." I found Algis Budrys' *Man of Earth* "a disappointingly thin effort" lacking any "vision of tomorrow," though I did note that Budrys, a good friend of mine, "writes here, as always, with care and integrity." I even dared to give the fearsome Damon

Knight a dose of his own medicine, noting that as a critic he "has mercilessly and ferociously lambasted the false, the poorly written, and the cynical in science fiction," but, though "when a man has branded a ten-dollar bill as counterfeit, he is not therefore required to make good the bill out of his own pocket," a critic must "measure up to certain minimal standards of performance" when he writes a book himself. This Knight, I said, had signally failed to do in his latest novel ("a pale, insubstantial" book). And so on for two sharply worded pages.

But the science fiction world of fifty years ago was a small and intensely social one. Burroughs was dead, and Leinster, an old pro, would hardly care about my sniping at him, but Budrys and Knight and many of the other writers I was reviewing were my friends, and I began to wonder whether I really should be assailing their work so vehemently in public. Knight, at least, seemed not to mind. In 1958, when I first began doing reviews, he wrote to me, saying, "I expect you to carry on in the old tradition; any namby-pamby politeness, & I'll visit the Knight Curse on you." And when I took him at his word six years later, this is how he responded to my review: "I don't know how you could get any closer to what I would have written if the book had been written by someone else. That was a deliberately commercial book, & by rights I ought to be ready to take my critical lumps along with my royalties, and I find that I am." As for Budrys, he never said a word to me about my harsh review, which I know he must have seen, but I suspect he must have been hurt by it, because I had known how much difficulty he had had in writing the book in question, a long, agonizing struggle. Perhaps it would have been kinder of me to greet the unquestionable failure of that book with silence rather than criticism.

Silence, in fact, seemed to me the best tactic in general. Many of my colleagues, I knew, were struggling with severe

financial problems and periodic writer's block and any number of other headaches; and, since my own life and career were very clearly going in the opposite direction, I felt it ill behooved me to be publishing negative appraisals of their work. Bad enough to have one's book sniped at in print; to be sniped at by a friend, and a friend whose own position was a secure and comfortable one, must surely seem intolerable. So I found myself evolving toward the same "praise and share rather than blame and ban" position that John Updike would later speak of. I did almost no book reviewing after 1965, and when I did briefly return to it in 1977 and 1978 my words were nearly all ones of praise. I did find one book by one of my own favorite writers "a stunning failure" in a 1977 review, but that, I think, was my last unkind word about someone else's material. Not that I found all science fiction to be unalloyed masterpieces—far from it. But after that I resolved to let someone else demolish the inferior work in the manner of Blish and Knight, and took no part in the public demolition work myself thereafter.

I still have some strong opinions about what is being published, of course, and I do sometimes express those opinions—taking pains to keep them between me and the friend with whom I'm talking. Which led to one final twist in my relationship with Damon Knight, that vehement defender of all that was true and proper in science fiction.

Damon, in the mid-1960s, had become the science fiction editor for one of the major paperback houses, and in the course of time published a novel so dreadful, so totally awful, that I could not resist dropping him a note of protest. Anyone unfamiliar with science fiction, I said, who happened to pick this book up to see what SF was all about would throw it away after a couple of chapters and never go near our field again. What sort of service to science fiction did Damon think he was performing by letting a book that bad go into print under his auspices?

Yes, Damon replied, the book was unquestionably terrible. But there were two extenuating circumstances: the author was a black man, and he had written the book while serving time for burglary in the penitentiary. Thus Damon saw publication of the book as a blow for racial equality and also as a personal act of charity toward a troubled human being.

I was unimpressed. What, I asked, did an act of reverse prejudice of this sort do to bring about racial equality? And why did the fact that the author was a convicted burglar justify publishing his terrible novel? Damon's response was to publish a second novel, just as bad, by the same writer. And so I saw that the critic who in the 1950s could use such words as "horrid" and "nonsense" when discussing Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*, and worried about the example that the commercial success of such a bad book would set for the publishing industry, had an entirely different set of standards when he was on the other side of the editorial desk. It was a useful lesson in the futility of criticism. Matheson's book sold and sold, and is regarded as a classic now. The two clumsy novels by the ex-convict that Damon Knight published long ago sank without a trace, and the man never sold anything afterward. In neither case did Damon's position, giving sharp treatment to Matheson's book on the one hand and high-mindedly publishing two unworthy novels on the other for reasons that had nothing to do with their literary quality, have any effect on the future of science fiction publishing.

Better to keep my opinions to myself, I thought, and avoid injuring my friends. And so, after once having called a friend's book "a disappointingly thin effort" in a published review and having said of another's that it was "a stunning failure," I gave up negative reviewing forever. Praise and share, don't blame and ban, said John Updike in 1975. I came to the same conclusion a couple of years later, and have stayed with it ever since. ○

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The author tells us, “I’m a thirty-year-old Texan, originally from San Antonio where I grew up and got a degree in physics. I’m a graduate of the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers’ Workshop, and, more recently, got my MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. While I was at Iowa I developed curricula for science fiction and fantasy focused writing courses. After I graduated I stayed on for a year as an adjunct professor, teaching a course I designed on Writing and Reading Science Fiction—a course that, I’m proud to say, was very popular and is still being taught.” Eugene now lives in Austin, where he’s working on a novel set approximately twenty years after his character, Tess, begins to discover the unsettling repercussions of becoming . . .

THE NEW MOTHER

Eugene Fischer

The girls were spayed. That is the only word for it. Four sisters, the oldest five and the youngest barely two, with dirt-crusting fingers and baggy T-shirts, huddled next to a police van. They are identical in the way of twins; different sizes but, excepting perhaps some scars and birthmarks, their bodies are the same. The picture of them standing together next to the van is like a textbook illustration of early human development. And hidden under their shirts, carved low across the belly, the one scar they all share.

None of the many news services that reported the story said that the girls had been spayed like bitches. In the articles, they were “subjected to hysterectomies,” or similar overly clinical distortions. But the video of the police raid on the Charismatic Church of the Redeemer shows the Reverend Kenny Kendall’s eyes wheeling in their sunken sockets as he is led out in handcuffs. While there are no known videos of the sermons he delivered to his followers in their South Texas compound, if they were anything like the screeds on his website then he told his congregation that “a person in whom a seed has not been planted cannot have a soul, and so is not a person true, but an animal grown obscenely person-shaped.” It seems clear that what Reverend Kendall saw growing up and wearing out shoes in his perfect community were not little girls. They were vermin. Only a matter of years away from becoming a pestilence. What he had ordered done was a veterinary procedure.

Interviewed in prison, Reverend Kendall explains. "It took a while to realize what we had, of course. What they were. I'd imagine it takes a while for everyone, you know. And how could we suspect? None of us knew what Candace had done." Candace Montross, the girls' mother and former member of Kendall's congregation. "But once Johnnie had his accident, everyone knew it weren't his seed showing in Candace. Then the truth came out, as it is wont to do."

Candace was taken to Camp Kendall (as locals in nearby Wharton call the church compound) by her parents at age eleven. At seventeen she ran away and hitchhiked to Houston, but found herself ill-equipped for independent living and called her parents to beg money. She was tracked down, taken back to the compound, and married to Johnnie Montross. Her oldest daughter was born nine months later. She's now twenty-three and still legally married to Johnnie, fifteen years her senior and paraplegic since falling off a roof a year and a half ago. She's also pregnant again, for the second time since Johnnie's accident.

"She whored herself in Houston, obviously, and caught it and brought it back with her. Couldn't do anything to her directly with her parents right there in the pews, a man and a woman. But even they eventually came to understand it weren't an abortion. They were as disgusted as anyone at the idea of Candace bearing more of those monsters. All with their own daughter's face! What does it mean, I ask you, for the institution of motherhood, for all of us, if we let that sort of thing happen?"

There are certainly monsters in this world. Sometimes they ask valuable questions. What does it mean, indeed?

The light slanting through the windows had dimmed to nothing while Tess typed. A moth landed on the screen of her huge new monitor, now the brightest thing in the room. She had spent years of her life submerged in her recliner, cup of coffee at hand, ancient heavy laptop balanced on her stomach. Judy had long offered to replace the battered machine, but Tess was attached. She liked how solid it was, the familiar heat of it, every well-earned scratch in the plastic. She'd swapped out the keyboard twice and the screen hinges once. No other laptop felt right to her. But when Tess finally started to show, Judy came home with a new TV stand, wireless keyboard, and that thirty-inch beast of a monitor.

"Your computer is a fetus panini press," she said. "You can have it back in five months. Until then, it's living on the stand."

Judy had developed a brooding concern for Tess's physical well-being. Judy's sister had quipped it was "typical Daddy anxiety," but Tess knew it was also partly guilt over having won the donor argument. Judy's position that they should use an unknown donor, that it was more important to control for all-too-common legal risks rather than astronomically unlikely medical ones, had eventually won Tess over. But in the aftermath of that victory, she had become overprotective of Tess's health, solicitously interrogating every groan and snuffle. Tess had told her to knock it off, but it was kind of gratifying.

So now Tess typed her articles on keys that felt fragile under her fingers. And the mug by her side was just milk with a splash of coffee for flavor. Her obstetrician had recommended that she quit coffee entirely. Something about her chronic borderline anemia. The first trimester was supposed to be bad enough all on its own, but she had a private theory that the worst of her troubles, from muscle aches to nausea, had really been due to caffeine withdrawal.

Tess got up to turn on some lights and brush away the moth. The screen was radiating a haze of heat and she flushed with mild resentment. She leaned over the laptop on the stand to review her words. Tess guessed that her editor might complain

about the “spayed like bitches” line. She moved to change it to something tamer, then stopped herself and left the line intact.

It was her first time working for this editor. She had spent the last four years freelancing for the alternative press, building an audience writing articles for *The Hiccup* and *Bentedge* and *The Stage Left*. An audience that apparently included Lynette Robin, features editor for *American Moment*, who had contacted her out of the blue with a contract offer for a story on HCP. The police raid on Camp Kendall had gotten a lot of attention and Lynette wanted to publish an overview article on what had befallen Candace and her daughters while the news was still hot. Tess had been reporting on the issue for long enough and was Texas-local; could she, Lynette had asked, meet an aggressive deadline for a feature story? If she could, the job was hers.

Tess turned on networking, and all the new email alerts popped up in the corner of her screen. There was no sign of the message she was hoping for, the one from Candace Montross’s attorney saying that his client had finally consented to an interview. But right at the top of her inbox was Lynette, writing back about the outline proposal she’d requested Tess send.

Outline looks good. Just a few things: I’m not sure about a whole section on the Chinese one-child policy. Not because it isn’t relevant, but just because American Moment has something of a mandate to focus on contemporary American culture. Maybe we could include a condensed version of that content as a sidebar? Or spin it into a follow-up article once we’ve built interest? Let me know what you think. Also, you need a section detailing the mechanisms of the disease. I know that sort of thing wasn’t necessary when you were writing for The Hiccup, but for much of our readership your article will be their introduction to this condition. I think it’s worth nailing down the specifics. Other than that, green light all the way. I’ve attached the travel reimbursement form, just fill in the blanks for your expenses. And start sending me copy when you have it. I’m excited about this one.

—LR

She was so hands-on. Cheerful about it, but still Tess bristled. She’d never been asked to submit in-progress copy before. The request felt invasive, like she was being asked to spread her closet out on the front lawn. The readership was worth it; an article for *American Moment* would get ten times as many readers as anything else she’d written. More, even. But the thought of several weeks of back-and-forth made her tired.

Everything made her tired. She slapped her laptop closed, and the monitor spasmed through a handful of test screens before settling sullenly to black.

Upstairs, in the glass and cherrywood cavern of their bedroom, Tess found Judy already in bed. She was propped up on a pile of pillows, reading glasses tight under her eyes, pallid in the wash of light from her bedside lamp and her tablet. When Tess came in, Judy gestured at a suitcase standing in the corner.

“I packed your bag,” she said without looking up from her screen. “We’ll throw it in the car and I can take you straight to the airport from the party. Look through it. See if I forgot anything.”

Tess dragged her fingertips over the rough nylon of the suitcase. She rocked it back on its wheels and pinched the black rubber trim. “Did you forget anything?”

“No.”

Tess abandoned the bag and wandered off toward her nightclothes. “What are you working on?”

"Schools. Still schools. Not sure there's a preschool in this city that'll do. Three visits this week, and I've come away three different flavors of disappointed. I'm on the verge of deciding to just start my own."

Tuesday night, and already three more visits. "Do you know anything about how to run a school?" asked Tess, shrugging into her pajamas.

"Nothing. Yet. But somewhere in this city there's a brilliant educator who's spent a decade banging her head against incompetent administration. She knows. Probably there's a dozen of her. I'll find them all and pick the best one. If I get started in the next six months, by the time Decaf is three we'll own the best preschool in town." She clicked off her tablet and dropped it on the charging mat by her bedside. "I think I'd do this one as a nonprofit. I've been wanting to do a nonprofit."

Tess got into bed and flopped over, buried her face in Judy's hip. She felt Judy's fingers comb across her scalp and inhaled an atmosphere of fabric softener and banana body wash. Judy always showered at night. Tess usually showered in the morning. "Suppose this was inevitable," she mumbled toward the mattress.

Judy had a habit of turning personal obstacles into entrepreneurial opportunities. Inspired by her own turbulent youth, her first company was a child access center, providing supervised exchanges and visitation for the children of violently estranged couples. When the private ambulance company for which her stepsister worked as an EMT collapsed under the weight of an embezzling scandal, Judy bought three of the vans in liquidation and founded a replacement, moving her sister behind a desk to handle the day-to-days. When she built her house, she'd worked with an architect willing to study up on sustainable building practices, then partnered with her on a consulting company for green renovations and remodels. Tess had profiled Judy after that company's winning bid on a convention center renovation. "I like service industries," Judy had explained to Tess in their first interview. "Business contexts change, but people are a constant." The two of them met up later that week in a sushi bar, then again the very next night at a wild game restaurant Judy knew about in a one-hundred-year-old log cabin. Tess moved into Judy's house when the lease on her apartment expired eight months later.

"Did the editor write back?" asked Judy.

"Yeah. I've got a fancy travel spreadsheet to fill out and everything. It's all covered. Except for China."

"Were you planning on going to China?" She slipped her glasses to the tip of her nose and stared down at Tess over the rims. "You're supposed to tell me before you go to China."

"Take those off. I was going to write about it. But everything else is a go. Including the interview with the Montross girl that I don't actually have yet. I think her attorney's ignoring me now." Tess rolled over on her left side and felt marginally more comfortable. "I promised I could get her."

Judy planted a reassuring palm on the round of Tess's hip. "You'll get her."

"What if I can't?"

"Then you'll have to rework the article. But you will. You got an interview with the guy in prison, didn't you?"

Kenny Kendall had talked to Tess against his attorney's advice. Before the interview, she thought it was because her article was the biggest microphone available to a man in love with his own voice. And maybe that was part of it; he'd struck her as someone who'd been waiting his whole life to paint himself as martyr to a cause. But it wasn't just that. He'd recognized Tess. Knew her by name. Had leaned back in his orange jumpsuit, pinched at his eyebrows, and said he'd expected someone bigger.

Tess tried to put it out of her mind. Being part of the story, rather than just reporting it, would make talking to Candace even more complicated. Her inability to find Candace at all was enough to worry about for now.

"Are you still using the light?" she asked.

Judy turned the lamp off and the soft LED gloaming of idle electronics filled the room. Tess stole pillows from Judy's hoard, one for her head and one for between her knees. The comforter flapped against her body and Tess felt Judy's arm slip under her own and drape across her ribs, warm breath on the back of her neck. Tess moved Judy's wrist so it wasn't pressing on her breast.

"How important is it that I go to the party?" Tess asked.

"You have to go to the party. It's for you."

"It's going to be crowded," she said.

Judy didn't answer.

"I'm too focused on this trip."

"You can handle it," Judy said. "It's gifts and sitting, you'll be fine."

Was there anything more awful than gifts and sitting? Tess curled in her knees. "I wish I could take a pill."

"No flippers for Decaf."

"No flippers for Decaf." It was a phrase worn smooth, a call-and-response begun in the months since Tess learned that she had to quit her anti-anxiety medication for the duration of her pregnancy.

Judy's breath slowed and evened. Tess shifted, twisted onto her back. Judy stirred but didn't wake, just tucked her narrow nose into the pillow and pressed pale knuckles to her mouth. Judy's was an accommodating sleep that came when called. Tess's sleep, like her ability to enjoy her friends, came usually from a medicine bottle. The pills used to sit out on her nightstand, but were now shut away in the bathroom cabinet. Tess wondered what, if any, meds would be in the bag Judy had packed for her. None of her normal ones. She wouldn't be surprised to find instead one of the herbal supplements with which Judy decorated their pantry. Valerian or something. Tess had no faith in substances she couldn't imagine being synthesized in gleaming, sanitary laboratories, surrounded by starched white coats and lasers. Taking one of those grassy capsules was like eating off the floor.

Without her prescription bottles, all she had left were words. Pliant letters on the page. The story was what mattered. Losing the cross-cultural angle would change the balance of the piece. She let the article fill her mind, then experimentally plucked out China. She shut the country away in the cabinet and watched her words twist and flow to fill the hole. Contexts shifted, sentences blossomed, and paragraphs slid over and through each other until, eventually, they began to blur into dreams.

Candace Montross's condition has yet to be definitively named. It was first called Human Asexual Reproduction Syndrome, or HARS, a term that proved less than fully accurate with the discovery that the disease is sexually transmitted. The name is no longer used within the medical community, though it remains in use online, where reactionary commenters still make references to "HARS whores." Terms in more common use are Human Communicable Parthenogenesis (HCP) and Gamete Diploidy Syndrome (GDS). HCP is the popular term among the affected; the most widely read news site for this growing culture is titled The Hiccup. But GDS has become the preferred nomenclature in the medical journals, and is the term that will be used in this article.

All of these names are attempts to capture precisely how it is that babies are being made now in a way they have never been made before. Recall the old, familiar recipe: two cells, a sperm from a man and an egg from a woman, fuse into a single cell that grows into a baby. The sperm and the egg can fuse this way because they are, at

genetic level, different from all the other cells in the body. Every cell contains our complete genetic code, split up into twenty-three chromosomes. Most cells have two copies of each chromosome (one from Mom, the other from Dad) for a total of forty-six. This property of having two copies of every chromosome is called "diploidy." Almost every cell in the human body is diploid. The lone exception are the gametes, the sperm and the egg. Gametes are "haploid"—they only have one copy of each chromosome. Being haploid is what allows two gametes to fuse into a single diploid cell with a new mix of chromosomes that will develop into a genetically distinct person. This is sexual reproduction, the way human beings have made more human beings from the beginning of the species until sometime in the last six years.

Candace Montross's eggs, like the eggs of a growing number of women around the world, are not haploid. They are diploid. Her eggs are fully capable of implanting in her womb and growing into a baby that shares every one of Candace's genes, a perfect clone of her only biological parent. They weren't always that way. Her gametes were altered after she was raped by a man in Houston who also had diploid gametes, and who also wasn't born that way. They both, now, have GDS. Since diploid sperm are nonviable, Candace's rapist is a sterile carrier of the disease, which renders all men who contract it sterile. But they can still transmit it to women, whose diploid eggs will put them at risk for pregnancy whenever they ovulate. Their genetically identical children will themselves be carriers, and will similarly begin auto-impregnating when they reach puberty. This is a new form of reproduction that crowds out the old, and only time will tell which method is more robust.

There were giant ants in the Atlanta airport, six feet long at least. They stretched across the ceiling in a curious, seeking line that curled down the wall of baggage claim. One lone ant had been installed on the floor, and Tess ran a hand over its copper and urethane carapace as she walked by on her way to the car rental desks. When she got to her hotel room, she found ants there too. These were alive and more traditionally sized, clumsy brown specks swarming the lid from a pudding cup that had fallen behind the nightstand and been overlooked by the housekeeping staff. The second room she tried stank of cigarettes and sent her, retching, back into the hall. The third was tolerable.

In the morning, Tess found that her lavender blouse didn't fit right anymore. She wasn't that much bigger in the chest, but still the fabric gaped between the buttons and pulled tight around her shoulders. Her skirt sat lower than she was used to, also. She tugged and adjusted, but there was no fixing it. At least her jacket still fit, if she wore it open. The sides hung down like a charcoal frame for her belly. It hadn't made sense to Tess to buy a whole new professional wardrobe for something that would be done within a few months. And how often did she need to get this dressed up for work anyway? Before the Kendall raid, almost never. The last time she'd talked to Dr. Long-Kamal it'd just been a day of intermittent emails. She'd done the whole thing in sweatpants. Tess gave her hems a final tug in front of the mirror, then looked over her notes until it was time to head to Emory.

Eleanor Long-Kamal. Forty-six, unmarried, no kids. Undergrad at UC Santa Barbara, Ph.D. in epidemiology from the University of Colorado. Discovered what she called at the time "Human Asexual Reproduction Syndrome" a little under two years ago, while faculty at the University of Texas Health Science Center. "Discovered" in that she was the first scientist to notice the disease; thousands of women, of course, knew about it already. Tess was one of them. But Dr. Long-Kamal's discovery was the tipping point for the medical community. This would be Tess's first face-to-face encounter with her, and their first full interview.

Dr. Long-Kamal was out when Tess arrived. "She's on joint fellowship with Rollins and the CDC," the department secretary explained. "There's an off-site lab where she spends a lot of time. Can't be she's gone long though, sweetie. I know she's expecting you." She led Tess to a break room with a long folding table, an assortment of orphaned chairs, and a love seat where a grad student napped with his knees bent over the armrest, blue and gray sneakers dangling. The secretary roused him and gave the seat to Tess.

"You want some coffee? Or there's usually some Cokes in the fridge." She yanked open the refrigerator. "There's no Cokes. But can I get you coffee? Or some water?"

"No, it's all right. I probably shouldn't drink anything."

"Oh, I know how it is. I've got three myself, two boys and a girl. The bathroom's out this way, end of the hall on the left. You come and say if you need anything. Or send Derek. He's not doing much, is he?"

The grad student had dragged three chairs into a row and stretched himself over them, trying to get comfortable enough to go back to sleep. When the secretary left, he shrugged into a seat back and said, "I've got two hours left on my protocol before the centrifuge." Tess nodded, and the grad student closed his eyes.

The walls of the break room were covered in posters and announcements. There were false color micrographs of cells, cutting-edge smears in neon blue and green. There were handwritten signs and notices. "Please rinse out coffee mugs thanks." "This fridge is for FOOD ONLY!" Taped up on the wall near Tess's head was a print-out of a graph with the words "FUCK YES." written above in marker. The figure, all dots and trend lines, was utterly incomprehensible.

Tess shifted in her seat, chased an itch under the edge of her shoe. She felt a stretching bulge, a brief squirming that she still couldn't quite convince herself was Decaf moving inside, and not just some intermittent digestive insult. She glanced at the grad student, dozing again with a white-sleeved elbow creased over his eyes. She realized she was holding herself frozen, taking shallow sips of air, like this was his bedroom and she was tiptoeing through. She dug her phone from her purse. IN A WAITING ROOM AT EMORY, she texted Judy. FEEL LIKE A SPECIMEN FOR DISSECTION. BUTTERFLIES AND PINS.

Her phone buzzed a moment later. YOU'RE THE JOURNALIST. YOU'RE THE ONE WITH THE SCALPEL. DID YOU TAKE A PILL?

Judy had packed one of her alternative remedies. Homeopathic, it looked like. Tess had found it the night before in a plastic bag with her soap, shampoo, and the new toothpaste that didn't make her gag, as the flavor of mint now did. In there too was a brown glass bottle around which Judy had taped a label in her own neat script reading, "Placebos. Take for anxiety."

Tess texted back, NO, BUT I SAW THAT. FUNNY.

THE EFFECT IS REAL. THAT'S SCIENCE, sent Judy.

WHY'D I EVEN FLY OUT HERE? CAN GET ALL I NEED FROM YOU.

A woman in a striped polo appeared in the doorway, hands braced across the frame. She had a name badge dangling from her shirt by a shiny metal clip and vibrant red frames resting on the deep cheekbones that Tess recognized from photographs. There was a streak of gray in her tied-back hair, though, that wasn't in her faculty headshot. "You must be Ms. Mendoza," she announced. She tumbled forward into the room and scooped Tess's hand in warm, strong fingers. "I'm Eleanor Long-Kamal."

"Tess."

"It's a pleasure, Tess. So glad we're finally doing this. I'm terribly sorry about the delay, I . . ." she stopped as she noticed the grad student lying across the chairs. She pulled away the one supporting his legs, and Tess started at the sound of his soles slapping the floor. Eleanor said, "Derek, is that a lab coat in the break room?"

The grad student hunched up on his elbows. "It hasn't been in the lab. It's an extra. Clean from my office." He glanced up at the wall and added, "I've got two hours left on my protocol."

Eleanor loomed over him. "Sure, you know it's clean. Anyone else walking by just sees one of my researchers napping in a lab coat. Do you want the undergrads thinking that's okay? Or any reporters that should happen by, like our guest here?"

"I only grabbed it 'cause they keep this place freezing."

"Bring a jacket. I can't have the press thinking I don't care about contamination in my lab," Eleanor turned back to Tess. "Come on down to my office."

Once they were out of earshot of the break room, Eleanor said, "Hope I didn't make you feel on the spot, using you to bludgeon Derek like that."

"So he's not supposed to wear a coat outside the lab?"

"God no. The stuff we work with? He should have known better. I'm big on lab safety. When I was in grad school I used to see people eating in lab coats sometimes. Turned my stomach."

Eleanor's office was a long, shallow room dominated by an ornate mahogany desk. The desktop was immaculate, but the floor surrounding was a shantytown of papers, journals, and books in teetering piles. Eleanor hefted some binders out of a cracked leather wingback by the wall and dragged the chair over, nudging stacks out of the way with the side of her boot.

"I'm a pretty organized person at home," she said. "I've only been in this office five months. I guess that's a long time, actually. But you know how things get away from you. Sit, please. So," she said, lowering herself into her desk chair, "before we begin, if it's not an indelicate question, can I ask how much of a personal stake you have in this topic?" She gestured with her chin at Tess's abdomen and leaned back in her seat so the springs creaked.

"I don't have it, if that's what you mean," said Tess, sitting down. The wings of the chair jutted in her peripheral vision like broad palms waiting to squeeze her skull. She felt a press of claustrophobia. She swallowed it back, but inched forward in the seat and leaned to retrieve her voice recorder. "But everyone has a personal stake, I think. Some people just don't know it yet."

"It's so nice to do an interview with someone who gets it," said Eleanor. "You know, you were the first to look for me. I'm surprised you're writing for *American Moment*, though. Their science reporting is usually terrible. No offense. I mean, obviously I still read it."

"It's my first time writing for them," said Tess. "And this won't be a science article. I'm focusing on the social implications of the disease. The future of motherhood. Things like that." She put her recorder on the desk between them. "May I?"

"Absolutely. I'm happy to answer any questions I can."

Tess turned on the recorder. "Okay. So you were the first to discover GDS. Tell me how that happened."

"I began looking into it about, oh, twenty months ago. This was back in San Antonio. I was primarily researching *Toxo* at the time—that's *Toxoplasma gondii*—and I read an article in the *LA Times* about a new psychological condition that was hitting pregnant women and new mothers, where they refused to believe their children really belonged to them. People were calling it 'maternal dissociative disorder.' As a *Toxo* researcher, I was used to thinking about possible infectious causes for psychological changes, so this was pretty interesting." Eleanor leaned sideways in her chair and plucked something off the floor behind her desk. A plastic ball that expanded when she tugged on the sides. She played with it in her lap, colorful struts thrumming together as she spoke. "Of course, in the end it turned out not to be psychological at all. That initial misconception made people miss it for a long time."

"That's my next question. Why did it take so long for the medical community to realize this was something new? Because, as I understand it, we now think that GDS has been spreading for at least six years. Are you saying that the whole time it was just doctors who wouldn't listen to their patients? It really took six years for someone to believe that women knew what they were talking about when they said there was something strange about their pregnancies?"

"That's a little unfair," said Eleanor. "You have to understand that there was nothing about this disease that would show up on the radar of the public health community. Even my initial interest was purely speculative. The only solid evidence for GDS was demographic. A slight bump in the birthrate and more girls being born than boys. No scientist looks at that data and thinks infectious disease. You see that and you look for social and environmental factors. Abstinence-only education and hormones in beef. We're talking here about an STI whose only visible symptom is sexually active women getting pregnant. It was impossible to figure out what was happening until we started seeing it in infusion patients. Before that, there was no way to tell."

"You can't say there was no way to tell," Tess said. "You could tell by listening to what women were saying. The alternative press started reporting on unexplainable pregnancies four years ago. I know, I wrote some of the stories."

Eleanor shrugged. "They started being right about it four years ago. Fringe publications have been writing about virgin births a lot longer than that. As a scientist, you don't start writing a grant proposal until you see it happen five times in the same hospital."

Tess jotted *grant prop* in her notebook, a reminder to quote that line. *Profit motive. Perverse incentive?* She felt flush with uncharitable objectivity. "Okay, then. So now that you do know the condition exists, are you any closer to understanding what causes it?"

"I can't answer that, actually. I have a paper on the subject under review right now. I can't discuss results that are pending publication."

"So you have learned something new about the cause."

Eleanor gave a thin smile. "I promise, I'm not just being coy. I really can't talk about that. Come back and ask me again in a few months."

"All right. So then, officially at least, we still have no idea what's causing it. Everyone thinks it's a virus but—I know, you can't comment on that. But we do know what it does. So what happens now? How do you see this situation developing?"

"That's a multivariate question," said Eleanor. She put down her toy, went to a bookcase, and started scanning titles. "It could develop a lot of ways, and will certainly develop differently in different places. For the U.S., the best case scenario is still that GDS turns out to be a curable condition."

"So things could go back to normal?"

Eleanor laughed, a single sharp breath. "What do you mean by 'normal'? If normal means how things were before GDS, not a chance. There's a way for women to reproduce without men now, and thousands of people already have it. That genie isn't going back in the bottle. Ah, here it is." Eleanor pulled a thick oversized paperback off the shelf and brought it back to the desk. "But in the U.S., best case, we could have a new normal. One where individual women choose whether or not to be parthenogenetic. This raises a whole host of political questions, though. Should sexual reproduction be considered the default? Should girls born with GDS be compulsorily cured, or allowed to choose for themselves when they reach puberty? If we let them choose, what do we do in cases where girls begin ovulating before the age of informed consent? Put them on birth control? If we don't, they'll never experience what we consider a normal childhood, but handing out the pill to children is going to be controversial." She wheeled her fingers in dismissive circles. "It just goes on. Even if we can cure it, things stay complicated. And that's for our country. Look at this."

Eleanor flipped through the book, found a chart, and turned it around for Tess to read. "This is *Trends in Maternal Mortality*. The World Health Organization publishes it every couple years. For every country they calculate the maternal mortality ratio, the number of maternal deaths per number of live births. In the developed world it's negligible, but in places like Sub-Saharan Africa, giving birth is one of the most dangerous things a woman can do. If you're a woman in Chad, your estimated lifetime risk of dying in childbirth, today, is one in fourteen. And that's with only, on average, six children per woman. Call it . . ." Eleanor flipped the book back around and looked up something in an appendix. "Call it seven or eight pregnancies total. A girl born with GDS could naturally experience over thirty pregnancies during her reproductive years. At those rates, if you happen to be a woman in Chad, you might as well just expect to die during childbirth."

Eleanor turned the book toward Tess again and went back to her chair. "Barring both a cure and a revolutionary change in the way we do foreign aid, the best-case scenario is that in thirty years the world's undeveloped countries overflow with orphans. Picture NGOs setting up quonset huts packed with tiny bunk beds. Soup lines of just little girls. That sort of thing. The famine is going to be on a whole new scale."

Tess pressed down the glossy page so she could look over the tables. Afghanistan, 1 in 11. Congo, 1 in 24. Haiti, 1 in 93. United States, 1 in 2,100. She copied down numbers and flipped to another page. "What's the worst case?" she asked.

"In the undeveloped world? Short term, infanticide, maybe genocide of the infected. Long term, extinction of the male population and massive reduction in average life expectancy," Eleanor said. "You can take that book if you want. They'll be putting out a new one soon."

Tess closed the book and put it in her bag. The follow-up article Lynette had proposed was already taking shape in her mind. "And in the developed world? What's the worst case scenario here?"

"Ah. I wish I could answer that one. It's something I think about a lot. But this is where I have to remember to wear my CDC hat," said Eleanor. "The CDC is a federal agency, and I've got three grad students and a post-doc working on money from the NIH. The truth is that for a wealthy nation like us, what constitutes the worst-case scenario is a policy question, not a science question. It's important for me to stay nonpartisan or I could put my funding at risk." She spread her hands in a *mea culpa*. "I think I'm more effective as a researcher than I would be as an advocate. I'm sorry. I know that's an unsatisfying answer."

"I understand," said Tess. She scratched another dollar sign in her notebook, out of fidelity to her earlier impulse to cast Eleanor as a kind of disease profiteer. But her heart wasn't really in it anymore.

"What I can tell you," said Eleanor, "is that our limiting factor won't be poverty. It'll be consensus. We have hospitals and access to hormonal birth control. However things end up, it's going to be the result of a series of collective decisions about values. So our job—I'm talking yours *and* mine now—is to try and make sure those decisions are as informed as possible."

Tess raised her pen and swirled it between her fingertips. "Working on it."

"And of course, there's nothing stopping you from advocacy, is there? I'm looking forward to seeing what you write. I promise not to call it terrible." Eleanor grinned, then shook a large rubber watch down her wrist and checked the time. "Do you have any more questions? I have a meeting, but I can go a few minutes more if you need."

"I think I've got enough here." Tess stopped the recorder and put it back in her bag. "I can get back in touch with you if I need to?"

"Oh, sure." They got up, and Eleanor shoved Tess's chair back against the wall. "Are you parked in the lot off Clifton?" she asked. "My meeting's across the street. I'll

walk down with you." Eleanor grabbed a small backpack and slung it over one shoulder. "Who else do you have on your dance card while you're in town?"

"Tomorrow I sit down with Donald Noyce of AABB," Tess said. "Then I spend a week in D.C. Talking with people who can go on the record about policy."

"I know Don a little. He's a good guy. A good guy with a bit of a talent for rubbing people the wrong way. But he knows his stuff."

"I've heard good things."

At the end of the hall Eleanor turned toward the stairwell. Tess paused by the elevators. It took a moment for Eleanor to notice.

"Wait, what am I thinking. We'll take the elevator." She came back and pressed the button. "Habit. Sorry."

"It's okay."

"So when are you due?" Eleanor asked.

"October twenty-second," said Tess.

"A little Libra. Unless he shows up late. Do you know what you're going to name him?"

The elevator chimed and the doors slid open. "My partner and I have been calling it Decaf. We don't know the sex yet. I'm scheduled to get a sonogram when I get back from this trip."

"Oh," said Eleanor. "Sorry. From what you said earlier, I just assumed you already knew."

"Not yet. Not for a bit. I think I'd be fine with not knowing, but my partner. She couldn't handle it."

The elevator counted down the floors with soft beeps. Neither of them said anything more, the first time Eleanor had stopped talking all afternoon. Tess leaned against the wall, letting the steel handrail press comfortably into her lower back, until the elevator spat them out at ground level.

As they walked outside into the Georgia sunshine, Eleanor asked, "So did you use a known donor?"

Oh. "No. No, it was an unknown donor. It's much safer. Legally safer, I mean. There's no risk that years later the guy decides he wants to try being your kid's father."

"Right. Of course." Eleanor nodded. "That makes sense."

Eleanor visored her hand over her glasses and scanned the sky. Then she caught Tess's eyes again.

"Okay, this is none of my business, but given what you said before . . . I mean, you're going to talk to Don about the blood banks, so you've probably thought of it already. But you do know there's a chance the sperm banks are going to be a problem too, right? That's another thing we might have to deal with."

Did she know about the sperm banks? Of course she knew. She and Judy had argued for weeks. It was almost certain that the sperm banks were contaminated to some degree. For Tess, at least at first, how great that degree was didn't matter. Any chance was too much. *The amount of time you've spent researching this has you paranoid*, Judy had countered. *Every medical procedure has some risk. We're in a state hostile to gays. The most important thing is to protect our family.* In the end Tess had conceded. Judy was right that, of all the dangers associated with pregnancy, GDS would be the most minor. She was right that their legal risks as same-sex parents dwarfed their medical ones. She was right that they could, if Tess was worried, reduce the chances even further by selecting sperm that had been frozen for several years. And she was so invincibly certain when she said *whatever happens, we can handle it*, that she was probably right about that too. But still.

"Do you have any statistics?" Tess asked.

"On sperm banks?" said Eleanor.

"Or demographic data. Anything unpublished. If it's out there, I'd have seen it already. I've looked."

"I can't discuss unpublished—"

"Off the record. Please."

Eleanor probed at a pebble of asphalt with the toe of her boot and wiped sweat from the back of her neck. "Census data isn't granular enough, is the problem. There's a longitudinal study underway. Where are you from?"

"South Texas. Houston."

"The birth rate bump in Texas has been slightly higher among Hispanics. Probably that's attributable to the Catholic distaste for condoms. But to do any meaningful risk analysis, you'd need to account for selection bias. What cross section of men choose to donate, and what, if anything, do the banks disproportionately screen for? I'm not sure we have that data."

"Yeah," said Tess, "I didn't think it was out there."

"The chances are really low. Honestly, almost all pathogens are taken care of by the sperm washing process. Usually sexually transmitted infections are due to exposure to semen, not sperm. With this one, though . . ." Eleanor seemed lost for what to do with her hands, and pushed them down into her back pockets. "I just wanted to make sure you were aware."

Tess sighed. "I think I know about as much as anyone does."

Eleanor nodded, and paused again. Tess was ready for goodbyes, but then Eleanor said, "'Off the record' means you absolutely can't publish it? Under any circumstances?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, I won't write up any of this."

"It's not a virus."

"What?"

"GDS. It isn't a virus. It's a massively drug resistant bacterium. An obligate intracellular parasite. Like chlamydia," said Eleanor.

"Chlamydia?"

"It's not chlamydia, that's just another organism with a similar life cycle. Kind of like a bacterium that wants to be a virus. It lives in the cytoplasm of the host cell and reproduces there. So if sperm washing doesn't work, that'll be the reason why. That's all I can say for now, but we're figuring this thing out. Seriously, come back and talk to me in a few months. I'll have things to tell you. Ones you can publish."

Tess reached out for a handshake. "Thanks for sitting down with me," she said.

"Good luck with your article." Eleanor lingered a moment. "And on the rest of it. Good luck." She let go of Tess's hand and headed off.

Tess went to her car. She thought about her trip to the sperm bank with Judy. The two of them had looked through the database and decided on an unknown Anglo donor. (Anglo so that their child would share an ethnic heritage with both of its parents. Though the scrubs-wearing teenager who handled their paperwork at the clinic had helpfully informed them that "mixed-race sperm" was available, in case Tess wanted her baby to look just like her. Ha.) They'd settled on a five-year-old sample, the oldest the clinic could provide. They'd taken every reasonable precaution. And maybe, in a few months, Eleanor would tell her that it wasn't a problem anymore. A shot for her, a shot for Decaf. Perhaps a shot for Judy, too, if it was even necessary. There was just no way to be sure.

Tess got out her phone to map the way off the campus and found a text from Judy, a stale response from their earlier conversation: THAT'S WHAT I ALWAYS TELL YOU.

She put the phone away.

There was some event going on in the school's auditorium, and Tess ended up in a long, creeping line of cars, most of them turning one by one into a parking structure.

The single-file inching reminded her of the giant worker ants in the airport. She wondered if there was any way to tell, as they swarmed the building in their statue stillness, whether they were supposed to be taking the place apart or putting it together.

Donald Noyce is a forty-year veteran of the blood industry. He has been a phlebotomist, worked for the American Red Cross, and now works for AABB, a nonprofit that promotes safety standards for blood-based medicine. He says there are two words being whispered behind closed doors in his field: profiling and speciation.

"The real question we are struggling with is: when are we going to bifurcate the blood banks? I can tell you, we're going to have to sooner or later."

The first cases of GDS to get widespread attention from the medical community were the result of blood transfusions. One might expect, then, that donations and transfusions would be primary areas of focus as our healthcare institutions adapted to this new reality. That turns out not to be the case. In the nearly two years that the medical community has been aware of the problem, there have been no changes to national policy on blood collection and distribution.

"We're all still waiting for an assay," says Noyce, meaning a blood test that can identify GDS. "Once we know what the bug looks like, things will be a lot easier. But you can't just put transfusions on hold while the science gets done. And if you can't screen blood directly, the only ethical choice is profiling. Now that's a dirty word, right there. But it's a lesser of two evils thing. It's more important that you don't get sick when you need blood than it is that everyone who wants to can donate."

The profiling Noyce refers to is the practice of barring members of statistically high-risk groups from giving blood. During the early years of the AIDS epidemic, that meant deferring intravenous drug users and homosexual men. Noyce worked for the Red Cross at the time, but was driven to resign by what he saw as the organization's inability to react in a timeframe necessary to save lives.

The nonprofit Red Cross didn't start deferring homosexuals until several years after the for-profit companies that buy blood and process it into expensive medications. "And then," says Noyce, "they forgot to ever switch back after we had a blood test, but that's a whole 'nother kettle."

Today the high-risk populations would be women who have given birth to daughters in the last six years and fathers of those daughters. (Girls younger than six would technically be on the list, too, and will have to be added if there still isn't a blood test when they are old enough to donate.) The more daughters a woman has recently had, the higher risk she is. Companies in compliance with AABB recommendations are now deferring women with three or more daughters under the age of six. There are no mechanisms currently in place to defer potential male carriers.

"It's not a perfect solution," Noyce admits, and runs a hand over his bald scalp. "Profiling is just a stopgap, anyway. We'll get an assay eventually. But when we do, we can't just throw away the positive blood. There are going to be a lot of these people. Eventually we're going to have to store their blood just to keep up with the population boom. But we can't get started on updating our infrastructure because of the [expletive] FDA."

The Blood Products Advisory Committee of the Food and Drug Administration is responsible for setting the guidelines that publicly funded collection agencies are required to follow. They commissioned a white paper on GDS, which ended up recommending precisely what Donald Noyce wants to see happen: the establishment of a dedicated infrastructure for collecting and storing GDS-infected blood. The recommendation became controversial, due to what Noyce identifies as an impolitic choice by the paper's authors.

"The poor bastard who wrote it never realized the trouble he was causing. His heart was in the right place, really. You read the report. The projections in there are sound, the timeframe is perfectly reasonable. It was just the words he used."

Enter "speciation." The white paper used this term to describe why it was necessary to double the number of categories in the blood industry, implying that, due to their different reproductive strategy, women with GDS should be considered a different species than men and women without. The debate over the accuracy of that assessment has incapacitated the FDA.

"No one wants to pull the trigger now. They're all [expletive] terrified of being the person who officially splits the human race down the middle." Noyce has several unpublishable alternatives for what the letters of the organization stand for. On the subject of speciation, though, he is agnostic. "I'm happy to leave that one to folks who have a better idea of what a species is than me. What I think about is that, whatever they are, they're people. And there's bound to be a lot of them. And they're going to need blood."

No one disputes that there will be a lot of them, but not everyone agrees that those who have GDS are people. While the FDA is paralyzed by fear of endorsing the idea that those with GDS constitute a different species, in other branches of government there are already attempts underway to enshrine the notion in law.

Tess was daunted by the access afforded her in D.C. as a reporter for *American Moment*. As she sent her bag through the x-ray machine at the Hart Senate Office Building and spread her arms for the wand-wielding security guard, she felt the familiar, irrational queasiness that all the eyes and sensors would peer through her credentials and spot an impostor. No matter her rituals of reassurance, the anxiety had only mounted during her time in the city, through all the meetings she'd already taken. She'd interviewed three representatives involved in GDS legislation and had an appointment with a fourth. There were lobbyists seeking *her* out, fighting each other for face time. And now she was about to sit down with Bailey Rogers, senior senator from Texas, who had unexpectedly found a free quarter-hour in her schedule. Members of her own family were harder to get ahold of than the politicians she wanted to see. After years of "could not be reached for comment," it made Tess feel as though she'd tricked her way into a sudden, fragile celebrity. But just as all the others had, the security guard waved her through without incident.

Tess consulted the building directory, then leaned her face close to the glass of a door so she could smooth down flyaway hair in her reflection. It wasn't really about her, of course, she thought as she headed for the Senator's office. It wasn't even that she was working for *American Moment*. It was because she was writing a profile on the Montross case, that was what people cared about. Anyone involved in GDS legislation wanted a chance to shape the conversation around the disease, and the infuriatingly absent face of that conversation was Candace Montross. Candace was the celebrity. Tess was, at best, her influential surrogate.

If Tess were actually a celebrity, Bailey might have deigned to touch her. Instead she waved off her assistant and cooed honey-voiced delight at Tess's presence while standing an arm's length away, then said, "Forgive me for not shaking your hand. It's not personal, you understand." She beckoned Tess to a seat in front of her desk. "My husband says I might as well quit, announce I won't run again, if I'm not going to kiss babies anymore. I told him, my career's okay, I can still kiss the ones in blue!" Bailey's wide hoop earrings jounced when she laughed, a contrast to her pile of silvery hair, which barely moved at all. The wall behind her was covered in framed photos. A campaign victory party in Dallas with Bailey surrounded by her four sons. Bailey in a cranberry pantsuit, shaking hands with the former secretary of state. Bailey sitting on a bipartisan panel at a breast cancer fundraiser.

"One of your staffers shook my hand when I came in," said Tess, sitting and getting out her things. "Might want to have a chat with him about it."

Bailey sat too, and laced her fingers together in what looked to Tess like a practiced pose. “We’re all struggling to get used to these changes. That’s why leadership on this issue is going to be so important.”

Tess flipped past her notes on Bailey to a blank page of her book. The notes weren’t extensive; Bailey’s motivations for sitting down with her were transparent. The Senator was a member of the appropriations committee for Health and Human Services, where she was working to keep tax dollars from going to GDS patients. Unfortunately for her, GDS patients had an inconvenient tendency to be pregnant women. Tess believed that Bailey had only agreed to the interview because she was worried about tarnishing the family-first reputation she had spent her career cultivating, and which was so critical to the electoral success of female politicians in Texas. Tess had voted against her two years prior.

“Let’s go on the record now,” she said, and clicked on the recorder. “How long have you been aware of the spread of GDS?”

“It was first brought to my attention three months ago.”

“How did you learn about it?”

“An aide briefed me. I have my staff keep me informed about what our former colleagues in Austin are doing. Can’t lose touch with state-level needs while I’m stuck out here in D.C. It was Texas research that discovered GDS, you know. We’ve been a leader on this issue from the start.”

“I know,” said Tess, scribbling *leader!!* in her book and adding a wavy underline for absurd emphasis. “You’ve put language into the latest HHS funding bill that would prohibit federal funds from going to any organization that provides prenatal care for women known to have GDS. Can you explain the reasoning behind that for me?”

“Absolutely. This is a measure consistent with the track record I’ve shown my entire career. I have always promoted solid public health policy, with a special focus on women’s health issues. That’s what this new regulation is.”

“How is it in the interest of public health to deny care to pregnant women?”

“You’re looking at it completely backward,” said Bailey. “The question is, how is it in the public interest for the government to subsidize the spread of a plague? Because that’s what we’ll be doing if we let taxpayer money go to increasing the number of cases of this disease.”

“But you’ve campaigned on child welfare. Surely this is a child welfare issue.”

Bailey nodded. “I agree. It is.”

“Then how can you reconcile that with an amendment that will necessarily mean higher infant mortality?”

“There’s nothing to reconcile, Ms. Mendoza. My voting record is perfectly consistent. I’m protecting the normal, healthy children in those hospitals. We can’t risk the health of the majority of mothers and children by exposing them to a disease we’re just beginning to understand. One which, from all appearances, will warp their entire lives.” Bailey placed manicured fingers gently atop the monitor on her desk. “I could show you dozens of letters from women in Texas distraught that they or their daughters may never have the opportunity to be normal mothers now. I could show you even more from men who fear that they’ll never get to father children at all. Until we know exactly what this disease is, the situation calls for the utmost caution. If we don’t handle this correctly, it could literally be the end of mankind.”

It was nothing Tess hadn’t heard before. The tune was so familiar she could sing along if she wanted. The only difference with Bailey was a little more polish, a better memory for the talking points. It actually made her a less interesting interview than the representatives, who occasionally slipped up in interesting ways. Gale Schoening of North Carolina had distinguished women with GDS from those without by referring to the latter as “real mothers.” Matthew Hock had said outright that his constituency

were "the natural-born citizens of Houston." When Tess observed that in just twelve years the first girls born with GDS would reach voting age, he had said, "We'll see. A lot can change in twelve years." But aside from personal quirks, responses were so alike Tess could practically write her notes in advance. GDS is a disease. We have to protect healthy people. Men could become extinct. Think of the at-risk men.

Given Bailey's facility for staying on message, there was only one interesting question left to ask. "Have you read Governor Buford's article?"

Bailey's eyes dipped and she pushed a sigh through her nose. "I have."

"And do you agree with his interpretation of pro-life politics?"

Cal Buford, former governor of Virginia and now senior partner of a conservative think tank, had just published an op-ed titled "Life Without Conception?" in which he mused that his long opposition to abortion stemmed from his belief that human life began at the moment of fertilization. He concluded that the lack of any such clear moment, combined with the risk that GDS posed to the male population, was enough to constitute an exception to the standard pro-life reasoning. He came out in favor of abortion for GDS daughters, and urged conservative lawmakers to do the same.

Some were already describing Buford's piece as representative of a split in conservative ideology, but to Tess the response looked more like a scramble. Everyone she'd spoken with had dodged the question. Even Representative Hock had limited himself to saying, "Cal is a smart man, and his opinion deserves weighty consideration of a kind I've not yet had time to devote to the issue," and refused to comment further.

Bailey, though, actually answered. "I've always prided myself on voting my conscience. I've broken with my party in the past, on occasion. On certain matters of principle. I respect the governor a great deal, and can only imagine that's what he thinks he is doing now. But there is no practice more contrary to the well-being of children than abortion. I've opposed it my entire career, and I continue to oppose it. I find it unfortunate that Governor Buford, intentionally or not, is supporting those who would exploit this disease to roll back the measures to protect children we've managed to pass in the last few years."

Her willingness to take a firm position was a surprise. But then, Tess supposed Bailey had been playing the game longer than anyone else she'd interviewed. In addition to her time in the Texas legislature, Bailey had spent eight years in the House before moving up. She didn't need to wait for the safety of consensus. She was entrenched, with solid connections, deep-pocketed backers, and a well-trained staff. After the interview concluded, Tess was able to walk out of Bailey's office without having to pretend to ignore the whispers and sideways glances that had followed her around Capitol Hill.

She was certain she was still being talked about, though. They were just courteous enough to wait until she was out of earshot to start speculating. The reporter from *American Moment* isn't just pregnant. She has it. She's a carrier. That's why the magazine sent her. Tess felt like people were wiping down the seats the minute she was out the door. Matthew Hock's office had been the worst, men shuddering inside their suits and gawking as she passed. On the Metro people saw her belly and deferred to her on the platforms, gave up their seats in the cars. It was whiplash, going from being coddled on the trains to being Typhoid Mary on the Hill.

Tess decided she'd had enough of being around people, friendly or fearful, and hailed a taxi to take her back to her hotel. She could expense it. She was meeting with a spokesperson from the American Family Association later, but needed time to recuperate from her morning. In the back of the cab she unwrapped the half-sandwich she'd saved in her purse. She was starving, and carried a taut discomfort under that hollow hunger, like she was an instrument Decaf was learning to play. Tess tucked the seatbelt under her arm and read through email on her phone as she ate.

Lynette had sent back the first round of edits, and a general note that Tess needed to tone down her rhetoric. *You've been on the story longer than anyone*, she wrote. *It's only natural for you to be opinionated. And I love your passion, but you have to hide it under a bushel for us.* As expected, Tess was losing the “spayed like bitches” line. She also couldn’t talk about “HARS whores,” or use the word “rapist” to describe someone who’d never even been charged with a crime unless she preceded it with “alleged.” And she couldn’t call Kenny Kendall a monster. Lynette had changed that line to a list of charges he’d be found guilty of “if convicted.”

He was going to be convicted. Kendall had pled not guilty, but seemingly just as a formality; the man wanted a trial. Outside the courtroom he’d all but admitted to it. To sterilizing pre-school-aged girls. Tess sent Judy a furious text. She wondered if she could have gotten away with calling him an *alleged* monster.

When she’d gone to see him, he had been thrilled to talk to her about GDS. To her, specifically. He’d recognized the name Intessar Mendoza from her articles. Apparently, before his arrest, he used to trawl left-leaning news sites for topics to inveigh against in sermons. “You’re smaller than I imagined you,” he said. “You write big, but you’re just a slip of a thing.”

Eventually, everyone would know. GDS was going to change the world. Children would grow up knowing about it. Would grow up having it. It wouldn’t be a secret for much longer. But Kenny Kendall had learned about it from her. Everything after—the brutalization of Candace and her daughters, the contract from Lynette, the conversations with congressmen—was a result of her articles.

It was almost appropriate, then, that the one person Tess couldn’t get in touch with was Candace herself. In addition to Lynette’s email there were messages from two more lobbyists, a reminder from her OB-GYN’s office about her sonogram appointment, and some mailing list background noise. But still nothing from Candace’s attorney.

There were supposed to be other ways in. If you can’t interview the subject, interview neighbors. Coworkers, teachers, relatives. A real professional is able to find the story. But everyone who had known Candace since she was a little girl was locked away, either behind the high steel fence of a religious compound or in prison. The court records were sealed. Tess had been so confident with Lynette, had told her how the HCP community was tightening, how everyone knew each other. But her normal contacts had been useless. No one had heard from Candace. She, apparently, wasn’t interested in trying to meet other people like herself.

So Tess was left emailing Candace’s attorney over and over again. It was like trying to open a jar with wet hands, but it was all she had. Maybe if, in the next letter, she revealed some information about Matthew Hock’s opinions of her family, Candace would be moved to provide a counterpoint.

Judy texted as Tess was pushing through the revolving door to her hotel lobby. DON’T WORRY ABOUT THE EDITS. SOME THINGS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES. DID YOU CALL YOUR MOTHER?

PHONE TAG, Tess sent back.

TRY AGAIN. TELL HER BABY SHOWER GIFT ARRIVED. CAR SEAT. V. NICE.

After her two children were out of the house, Tess’s mother had abandoned the southern California home where she’d raised them and moved to D.C., where she worked in human resources for a polling company. Tess had arranged to extend her travel an extra day to spend time with her. Tess didn’t consider herself close to her mother, but it was still a different class of relationship than she had with her father, who hadn’t been a meaningful part of her life since her parents divorced when she was four. And Judy’s parents—though she had worked hard as an adult to establish functional, if not always amicable, relationships with them—weren’t people Judy or Tess wanted having any influence on their child. So when the two of them decided

that it might be important for there to be a grandparent involved in Decaf's life, Tess's mother was the default choice.

Ensnconced in her room with the blackout curtains drawn, though, that decision seemed very distant. Tess remembered the conversation, that they had agreed readily enough. But now her conviction seemed slippery, diffuse.

Rest first, she decided. She shed her clothes and started a bath running. Rest, and then the lobbyist. She set an alarm on her phone for half an hour before she was supposed to meet with the AFA guy. Sparring with an intractable special-interest ideologue would be a fine warm up for dealing with her mother again.

In the past two months the legislatures of Arizona, Tennessee, Texas, Kansas, and California have all seen bills that would make it a criminal offense to intentionally contract or transmit GDS. Most of these aim to classify it as a form of aggravated assault, but the Arizona bill calls for transmission of GDS to constitute manslaughter, and explicitly references speciation. Thomas Conklin, the bill's author, argues that GDS makes one nonhuman, therefore it reduces the number of humans, therefore spreading it is something akin to murder. He justifies a provision against intentionally contracting the disease as an extension of the laws against suicide.

In thirteen states there have been efforts to criminalize the sale of GDS-infected biological products. The sponsors of these bills say that it is an obvious, pragmatic public health measure. But these measures, so far, have less political support than the bills based on speciation, as they would effectively shut down the \$16 billion private blood industry until a test is developed.

Nine states are in the process of revising their laws on maternity leave. Fifteen have held hearings on what do to about letting GDS children into public schools. None have an answer yet, but they all agree it's an issue. On the judicial side, the American Civil Liberties Union is pursuing several test cases designed to establish a precedent of equality under the law for GDS-infected women and their children.

Even within political parties, opinion is sharply divided. There has been a split inside Texas's Republican-dominated legislature, with the Senate passing GDS exceptions to the state's tight restrictions on abortion that the House refuses to support. If we are, as a society, moving toward consensus on this issue, it remains a distant target. But while no broad agreements are yet forthcoming, the terms of the debate itself, in Washington at least, are starting to become clear. The battle lines are shaking out as a woman's right to choose versus a man's right to exist.

Those whose focus is on protecting the rights of women argue that GDS is not inherently different than the birth control pill, or in-vitro fertilization. It's just one example of the many ways that human reproduction has changed, fundamentally unrelated to personhood. If those with GDS are to have fewer personal freedoms, the argument goes, then why not also test tube babies, or those conceived with the help of fertility drugs? No one has ever seriously suggested that these individuals are not people, and so neither should personhood be an issue in the case of GDS.

The men's rights camp argues that the crucial difference is that GDS, left unchecked, will necessarily make the male population dwindle to zero. This side sees GDS as an existential threat that permits no peaceful coexistence. Their fear is markedly similar to Reverend Kendall's dark vision of a feminine pestilence. Or, as Nancy Forsythe, a lobbyist for the National Organization for Women, explains it, "Feminism isn't merely a threat to male privilege anymore. Now a woman's right to biological self-determination is viewed as targeting not just the patriarchy, but the very existence of men."

Some of the methods these supposedly endangered men (and, as Bailey Rogers would remind us, no small number of women) favor for self-preservation harken back

to controversial periods of our history. Colin Langley of the American Family Association has begun making speeches reimagining the eugenics movement, in which he attempts to knock the stigma off of forced sterilization. He is fond of saying things like, “A sane society will not allow itself to be swallowed whole,” and, “All men are created equal” is an idea worth protecting.” Other proposals take as their spiritual antecedent the Japanese internment camps of World War II, arguing that people with GDS should be rounded up and quarantined. Not forever, of course, but until a cure is found. A more modern twist on what is essentially the same idea would have people diagnosed with GDS fitted with tracking devices, like those locked around the ankles of criminals on probation.

Forsythe views the claims that men face potential extinction as empty fear-mongering. “Even the most virulent of STDs has never infected anywhere near 100 percent of the population,” she says. “Heterosexual men and women are going to keep on breeding, just as they always have. What men are facing is not extinction, but a demographic shift into minority status. And like any historically powerful majority facing a demographic shift, they’re scared of being marginalized. So they’re over-reacting. These proposed laws are nothing more than an attempt to retain power.”

But not all who advocate legislation to curb the spread of GDS cite the need to protect men. Some of them say that new laws are necessary to protect women, and motherhood itself. Representative Matthew Hock of Texas argues that motherhood draws its virtue from being an unconditional loving relationship with a genetically distinct child. Of women with GDS and the children born to them, he says, “It’s wrong to call it motherhood. Mothers are women who bring a new person into the world. But these aren’t new people, are they? Just younger versions of people we already have. This disease takes a mother’s love and turns it into the grandest narcissism.”

Hock has sponsored legislation that would require known GDS carriers to register their movements with the government, in a manner similar to the National Sex Offender Registry. Women’s rights groups have already dubbed Hock’s proposal the Asexual Offender Registry, and say that he is attempting to criminalize having a medical condition. Hock counters that GDS carriers have been altered on such a fundamental level that simple prudence demands that they be watched. He notes that his legislation carries no requirements other than that those with GDS be monitored, with specifics of implementation and punishment for noncompliance left up to the states.

Hock’s opinions—that GDS women aren’t real mothers, that people with GDS are fundamentally different than those without—are especially worth noting, as he is the representative for Texas’s 22nd congressional district, covering a significant chunk of the city of Houston. Hock makes plain that he does not consider the GDS community to be among his constituency, but the fact remains that Houston is home to some of his grand narcissists. Candace Montross is one of them. By now she should be used to the leaders of her community claiming that she is not really a mother, nor her children human beings. It certainly is not a first for her.

Ms. Montross has no further statements for the media, and asks that her family’s privacy be respected.

Candace’s attorney had finally written back, and that was the entirety of his message. Tess had read it a half dozen times, hopelessly revisiting it over and over in search of some ambiguity or hidden opening. But there was nothing. The short sentence was a barrier with no chinks or cracks. This was the final denial, an ultimate dead end. Still, she kept pulling it out and parsing it anew.

Tess was looking at it outside the hotel lobby when her mother Layla pulled up. She rolled down the passenger-side window of her teal sedan, propped her sunglasses above her eyebrows, and called, “Is that my daughter I see?” She came around the

car. "Look at you." she gripped Tess's shoulders and looked her up and down. "Let yourself go, huh?" She gave Tess a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, I just keep eating and eating. No reason for it. Can't help myself, I guess," said Tess.

"Well hop in, then," Layla said. "Let's enable you."

Tess stuffed her phone away, swung her suitcase up onto the back seat, and got in the car with her mother. They crept along the narrow street near the hotel, then out onto a wider avenue. Layla turned down the radio chatter and said, "So how are you? How's your woman?"

"I'm fine. Judy's fine too. Going a little overboard about schools, but she's always happiest when she's going overboard about something."

It was quiet in the car for a moment. "Shopping first or food first?" asked Layla.

"Food."

"I'm taking you to the new best Lebanese place for lunch. This one's a hole in the wall, but the best restaurant kafta I've had in years. And their mujaddara."

"Funny how the best one is somewhere different every time I visit."

"They go through their ups and downs," her mother said. "Plus, it's not like you visit that often."

The row houses slid by like a flip book, whole blocks of fake stone and plaster in a dozen colors, masking the dull uniformity of identical façades that huddled behind perfunctory patches of lawn. There were grungy-looking convenience stores and liquor marts on the corners, and the sidewalks were populated with laconic dog walkers and midday stroller jockeys.

"So," Layla said, flicking the turn signal and swiveling to check her blind spot, "What are you all worked up about?"

"Excuse me?"

"What's pissing you off?"

Tess felt an old, familiar empty space open in her chest. "I'm fine, Mom."

"You're stiff as a plank and I can hear you grinding your teeth. Are you going to tell me what's wrong, or are we going to spend the day cordial and bored?"

Tess's mother had always been like this. It wasn't that she didn't believe in privacy, it was that she didn't seem to think Tess specifically was entitled to any. Her brother Emilio got a long leash, but her whole childhood her mother had insisted on total access. She offered guidance for each grade school intrigue, opinions on every middle school disaster. By Tess's teenage years, her mother's ubiquitous advice had sparked a cold war between them. Or maybe lukewarm. "Cordial and bored" was new, but Layla had no shortage of ways to call her petulant. Her mother's many disappointed dictums had been swirling in Tess's head for months, a mental inventory of things to remember not to say when Decaf was older. "Do you think families are built on secrets?" was one she used to like. "I'm just trying to provide perspective," was another.

When Tess came out at sixteen, her mother's response was that she was too young for those kinds of labels. That she wouldn't really know what she liked until she was older. In the face of Tess's self-righteous fury, she'd invoked it again and again: *the perspective of age*. The words still rang sharp in Tess's ears a decade and a half later.

She thought about Judy's advice, her key to interacting with her own parents: don't let their presence turn you back into a child. Hold on to the knowledge that the hurts are old, while you've become something new. Tess breathed deep and let her jaw fall slack in her mouth.

Her mother wasn't wrong. She was upset. And it wasn't because of anything between them. "I just got some bad news," she said. "Work news. For the GDS story I'm writing."

"That's the same one you've written about before? The disease that lets women have babies without a man?"

"Don't say it like that."

"What?"

"It's nothing new to have a baby without a man. I'm having a baby without a man."

"Come on, Tess. Don't be difficult."

"It's the same subject," said Tess. "But I'm writing for *American Moment* now. They read my earlier work. I'm making a name for myself in STDs."

"That's repulsive," her mother said, smiling. "What's the bad news?"

"I'm not going to get to interview someone important. Have you heard about Candace Montross?"

Layla thought, and shook her head. "Not ringing for me."

It was oddly pleasurable, her mother's ignorance. A reminder, despite how they had swallowed her life, of how fringe the issues still were. "Well. She's kind of the heart of the story. But I just heard from her lawyer that I can't talk to her."

"You've started taking 'no' for an answer now?"

"I've been at it for a while, Mom. After a certain point, the line between tenacity and harassment starts to be kind of blurry." Tess put her forehead against the window, then pulled back, wiped at the face-print with her sleeve. She tucked her head into the hollow of her elbow instead. "I don't know. It's getting to me more than it should. I'll be happy when the hormone flood is over."

Her mother just laughed.

They went past an old building with a new sign that read *Mashawi Lebanese*, and Layla announced "Here we are." She turned up a side street and looked for a spot to parallel park, passing up two that Tess thought were manageable before finding one to her liking. They walked back around the block and up to the flaking green door of the restaurant. Inside the tables were all four-tops with plastic tablecloths and silverware rolls in paper napkins. There were no customers, but there was a man in an apron standing near the door, with half-receded hair and a lined face. He smiled when they came in.

"Back again?" the man said.

"I brought my daughter Intessar with me this time."

"A pleasure," the man told Tess. "Your mother is one of our best customers. She comes here all the time."

"She knows what she likes," Tess said.

He led them to a table, poured two cups of water, and handed them a pair of laminated menus. Layla gave hers right back without a glance. She ordered kafta and labneh and said that they both wanted bowls of adas bis silq. "And tea for me, and I'll bet my daughter wants coffee."

"We only have instant," the man said.

"That's okay, Mom," Tess declined.

"What, it's good enough for you to hide in your room, but no good now?" her mother said, and turned to the server. "Instant will be fine."

When Tess was fourteen years old, her burgeoning coffee addiction had been a scandal between them. Her mother thought it some kind of unconscionable toxin, one that would ruin her complexion, her attitude, her entire life. She'd reacted to finding a stash of red canisters under Tess's bed as though they'd been packed with drugs.

Sitting across a table, watching her mother be so forcefully considerate, Tess wondered how much it was Layla's disapproval that fueled her earliest affections for the stuff.

"You know we're calling the baby Decaf, right? I'm not supposed to drink coffee."

"Aren't you in the second trimester now?" her mother asked. Tess nodded. "Then you're out of the danger zone. Don't let them push you around. Drink what you want."

Tess recognized the olive branch hidden in her mother's thorny insistence. And Judy wasn't around to judge. She conceded, and handed over her menu. "Mother knows best."

Layla grinned and ordered for them both. The man withdrew to the kitchen and returned with a teapot and teacup for Layla and crazed brown mug of coffee for Tess. She took a sip, and felt every cell in her body pucker to attention, welcoming a long-absent friend. Not just four months absent; it had been years since she'd last had instant coffee. Judy hated the taste of it. At home they had a fancy German coffee robot that ground beans individually for every cup. But to Tess it was the flavor of sneaking out her second-floor window and staying up until sunrise. The flavor of road trips and finals week and late internship nights. It was being alert and capable in a way she always used to feel, but now never did. Even Decaf seemed thrilled, kicking an enthusiastic tattoo as the warmth from the drink suffused her. It was too fast to be a reaction to caffeine. Had to just be that when Mommy's happy, Baby's happy.

Tess downed the rest in two gulps and handed the mug back for more when the man arrived with their soups. "Well? Still with us?" her mother said.

"Yeah. I think I should have enough time left for a last meal, at least."

"It's a good one," Layla said, and picked up her spoon.

The soup was all soft lentils and onions glowing against dark green wilted leaves, garnished with a wedge of lemon. Tess squeezed in the lemon juice, stirred, and tasted. It was good beyond all reasonable measure. If the coffee had been an overdue reconciliation, then the soup was an epiphany. Tess thought, not for the first time, that her pregnancy had turned eating into something she felt like she shouldn't be allowed to do in public.

"It's impossible to describe how good this is."

"Aren't you supposed to be the writer?"

"The words for this don't exist."

The kafta and labneh were just as good, and the entrees when they arrived. Over dinner they talked about their work, Tess about her meetings with politicians and Layla about the internal bureaucracies at Samplemetrics. Layla described the software she'd just bought to try to resuscitate her Arabic. Tess catalogued all the new things she'd gotten at her baby shower.

"Oh, Judy told me that a car seat arrived from you. She said it was nice. Thank you."

"It's green. I didn't know if I was buying for a boy or a girl, so I just got one to match your car. You still have the green car?"

"For now. Might need something bigger soon. But green's still fine. The whole point of having the shower before we learned the sex was so we wouldn't get gendered gifts."

"It was the earliest shower I ever heard of."

"We missed you there, Mom. Why didn't you come down?" They'd invited her. Judy had even offered to buy her ticket and put her up in a hotel if she liked. But Layla had declined.

"I work, Tess. A regular nine to five. We don't all get to make our own hours. And not everyone is as comfortable living off generosity as you are."

Tess's food went down wrong and she went into a fit of coughing. She had to duck her face into her napkin, then swallowed half her water in one go.

"Are you okay?" her mother asked.

Finally Tess was able to choke out, "What does that mean?"

"What? Just that I don't need your girlfriend buying me plane tickets."

"No, the living off Judy thing. I don't live off her. I work too. That's the whole reason I'm here."

"But who bought your plane ticket?"

"*American Moment* bought my plane ticket. I'm writing for one of the biggest news magazines in the country. I have an expense budget."

"Well, that's very convenient. But I'm sure she would have flown you out if the magazine had made you pay your own way."

"Why is that a bad thing, Mom? Judy supports my career. We've been together for years. We're having a baby."

"You're having a baby, not her. Why do you think that is?"

"Because she's ten years older than I am."

Layla shook her head. "It's because she holds the purse strings. I'm sure Judy supports your career, but she's sharp. People don't get where she is without being smart. She knows what she's buying with her money."

Tess's eyes already burned from the coughing. Now her focus wavered and started to slip. Echoes bounced around the hollow place in her chest, sending tremors through her body.

"Give me the car keys," she said.

"Oh, come on, Tess."

"Give me the keys!" She held a trembling hand across the table, and her mother sighed and dropped the keys into her palm.

Tess went outside and walked back around the block to the car. When she was a child, this is when she would have run away entirely. Out the front door or, if that wasn't possible, through her window. And back then she wouldn't have been crying, just too furious to speak. The crying was a new thing, one that seemed to draw energy from reflection. Thinking about it made the tears come more strongly, which made her angrier still.

It was several minutes before her mother joined her. Layla slid into the driver's seat, but didn't say anything, just listened to Tess's bitter sniffing and reached behind Tess's seat for a packet of tissues to offer.

Tess took the package and said, "I'll reimburse you for the food."

But her mother didn't take the bait. Instead, she said, "I cried all the time when I was pregnant with you."

"Why? Did someone tell you your spouse was a conniving manipulator?"

"No one had to tell me. It was obvious."

Tess barely remembered the divorce, but knew that it hadn't been amicable.

"Still," Layla continued, "that's not why I cried. Not the only reason, anyway. I never cried with your brother, but with you. There's something awful about carrying a daughter. With a son it's not so hard to pretend that the world will stand aside and let him through. But with a daughter it's impossible. Sometimes I would think, what right do I have, when I know what it will be like? So I cried." She put a hand on Tess's knee. "I was crying when I picked your name. Strongest one I knew. Your father hated it, but I'd let him name your brother after himself, so it was my turn."

Tess's name meant "victory." Her mother's meant "dark-haired beauty," though her hair had gone mostly white. The name had fit her when she was young. And the laugh lines cracking her face suited now. She'd been born with an acid jocularity that finally showed on the surface.

"Judy's not like you think," Tess said, blinking her eyes dry against a tissue. "And our daughter wouldn't need the world to stand aside. She'd knock it out of the way."

"Maybe. And if you have a son?"

"It shouldn't make any difference," Tess said. But she thought of her brother.

Emilio had anxiety issues that far exceeded her own. As a child he reacted so poorly to conflict that in grade school he got permission to stay inside during recess. He always preferred solitude to company; the two of them spent the summer Tess was seven communicating entirely through long letters slipped under bedroom doors, the start of her writing career. These days he worked for the national forestry service, living in a park, checking in with the family a few times a year.

If men really were an endangered species destined for a future in zoos and on preserves, then her brother was ahead of the curve.

"Have you heard from Emilio?" Tess asked.

"He called me. A few weeks ago," Layla said.

"Did you tell him he's going to be an uncle?"

"I thought the news should come from you."

The car was beginning to get stuffy. Tess gave the keys back to her mother, and she started the engine running. Tess said, "Sometimes I think about going to visit him. Maybe when the kid's old enough we can all go on vacation."

"It's a lovely notion," Layla said. "I can't honestly say I think he would enjoy it, though. It's funny. I spent so much time when you were young worried about things that might hurt you. It never occurred to me to worry about how you'd hurt yourselves."

"You don't think Emilio's happy where he is?"

"I think you can be happy and still hurt yourself."

They sat a while longer watching cyclists and joggers pass on either side. When the thunder of their fight had died away it left a stillness, where cordiality was a comfort rather than a bore. Layla took them to her favorite shops of antiques and vintage knickknacks, where she looked at but didn't buy a set of wrought iron drawer pulls. She insisted, though, that Tess buy herself some bookends that caught her eye.

After that they went home, back to Layla's two story townhouse, pink brick with bars over the windows. They folded out and dressed the sofa bed in the living room, and then Layla said good night and disappeared up the stairs. She'd always been an early to bed, early to rise type, and it had only gotten more severe with age. She said she'd try not to wake Tess up when she rose with the sun, but wouldn't make any promises.

Tess sat on the bed and looked around. Her mother's living room was a confetti contrast of artifacts and styles, like an anthropologist's fever dream. Floral pattern couch. Calligraphy prints on the walls. Lurid santo from New Mexico. Decorative hookah from Morocco. A painted earthenware pot that Tess had given her, and a hand-carved gourd covered in Arabic script from Emilio. Layla had reasonable taste, but she never got rid of anything, and she cared more about individual objects than she did about combinations. Anything colorful, intricate, or recognizably ethnic was sure to catch her eye. The only things that really looked out of place were the plain white sheets on the mattress.

Tess felt a buzzing alertness that meant the caffeine had hit her bloodstream. And there was a bar running across the middle of the bed frame that pressed up under her weight. Tonight, for once, her trouble sleeping would be due purely to externalities. She got out her computer and read the email from Candace's attorney again. It was ridiculous, she decided, that everything should hinge on this one woman. There were so many. They were everywhere. And except for Candace, Tess knew them all.

She started a new typing.

Lynette,

Candace's attorney says she is categorically uninterested in talking to the media. Since everything about her life is either locked up in court records or behind the fence at Kamp Kendall, I'm changing the plan for the final section. We can keep the rest the same, though; open with Montross family, then general principles, and return to case studies. Just different case studies. Houston is home to plenty of Hock's grand narcissists. Here are a few I know I could get:

Sophie Bryant—landscaper, caught GDS from her husband who caught it from another sexual partner. (They're swingers.) Raising their three GDS daughters together, with the son and daughter they

already had. She has topiaries of all the kids in the front yard, and lets them do seasonal decorations of themselves.

Kelli Fernandez—lawyer, caught GDS during a kidney transplant. Single, no children (she had a hormonal IUD), but does family law. A lot of custody work. Focuses on GDS cases now, and can speak very knowledgeably about them.

Christina Rickards—teenager who caught GDS from her boyfriend. Her dad beat her up and threw her out of the house after her second pregnancy. She's on number three now, says she plans to have them all. Moved in with an aunt and graduated high school a year early, now in a pharmacy tech program.

Dorothea Velazquez—comatose after a scooter accident in San Antonio, now in long-term care in Houston. She got GDS from a blood transfusion, has had two babies that she's never seen. Her family considers them miracles, a way for Dorothea to return to them. Devout Catholics. They are committed to raising the children as long as she keeps having them. Her older brother is a very caring, enthusiastic, and quotable kind of slightly insane.

Chloe Pitt—piano teacher at a conservatory and keyboard player in a succession of post-rock bands. She and her partner Steph, a CPA, decided to contract GDS intentionally. First couple I know who did that. They each had one kid, then opted for surgical birth control.

Intessar Mendoza—Me. I don't have it probably. But I'm pregnant from an unknown sperm donor. I'll be having a baby in about five months, and I don't know if it's a boy or a girl. But I do know that the whole generations-long history of social baggage, the whole framework for how we understand what having a boy means or having a girl means—that's all irrelevant now. Everyone thought it was settled, but GDS has put what having a kid means up for renegotiation. There've always been precious few constants for the world to offer a new person, and now there are even fewer. The non-GDS perspective on parenthood in a GDS world has got to be of general interest. I'm willing to talk about it.

I could go on. That's just in Houston. You want a humanizing face for GDS, take your pick. It's the new human condition. We're spoiled for choice.

—Tess

Tess sent her ideas for the new closing section the next day, emailing Lynette over expense-accounted wifi in the D.C. airport. On the plane she found that someone had pushed chewing gum into the powerpoint by her seat, and her old laptop's battery gave out before she touched down in Dallas. She searched out a plug in the airport to recharge it during her short layover, then checked her phone. Lynette had already responded.

This isn't supposed to be an op-ed. The feature standards of American Moment do not admit the kind of authorial self-insertion you suggest. We publish investigative journalism, not meandering autobiographical rumination. Besides, when was the last time you saw a Pulitzer Prize winner that used the personal pronoun?

You got this contract and this deadline because you claimed to be able to write me a feature to capitalize on the attention of the Mon-tross case. I could have gotten any of my normal writers to do general

overview. I do not want an alternate case study from you, I want an article that follows your original outline. For that you need access to Ms. Montross. If you can't get it, then your piece is irreparably broken. Let me know when you have it.

—LR

She wanted to scream. She wanted to throw her phone against a tall airport window and watch one or both of them shatter to rubble. She filtered down the jet bridge and onto her next plane, people in the aisle deferring to her belly. She was in the seat at the back, next to the engine, where the noise and vibration swamped everything save her own futile thoughts.

By the time she landed in Houston, she was disconsolate. She stood puffy-eyed and travel sick on the curb until Judy pulled up.

"How was your trip?" Judy asked as she climbed into the car.

"Apparently a complete waste of time!" She told Judy what had happened, then got out her phone and read Lynette's response aloud, shouting the words *meandering* and *normal* and *irreparably*.

Judy asked, "Is that line about the Pulitzer supposed to be funny?"

"I don't know what the fuck she expects me to do," said Tess. "The court records are sealed, and her lawyer's stonewalling. There's no access. I've been tearing my heart out on this."

"I think you should calm down," said Judy, easing them out of the airport. "It's going to be okay."

"No it isn't. Okay is meeting my deadline. Okay is not having the bottom drop out of everything right at the very end. This is not how we get to okay."

But Judy was right. When they got home, she said to Tess, "I got you a present." She went to the tall table by the door that they used for mail and keys, and removed from its small drawer a scrap of green construction paper, which she handed to Tess.

The paper had an address written on it, and above that, *Florence Montross*.

While Tess was out of town, Judy had continued her hunt for Houston's greatest early childhood educators. Eventually her search took her to the kindergarten where Candace's oldest daughter had been placed. Judy had recognized her from Tess's pictures.

"I asked for some parent references, and the assistant principal just led me into the office and let me watch over her shoulder as she looked through the address book. I could have taken cell phone pictures of the whole thing if I'd wanted," Judy said. "I wasn't impressed by the professionalism there overall, frankly. I doubt I'll hire any of them."

Tess gaped. "And you were holding out on telling me all this why?"

"I was driving," said Judy. "I couldn't look at your face."

The next day Tess made her way out to a sprawling complex of stucco apartments, some of the buildings five stories high. There were retirees and college students. There were towels hung from balcony railings, incensed dogs barking from behind front doors, and shrieking children jostling for space in a minuscule pool. Heat mirages shimmered off the cars in the vast parking lots.

Candace's unit was on the third floor of building 22. For all the difficulty she had learning where to look, Candace's place wasn't hard to find. The numbers were screwed to the door over a dozen glossy coats of paint, bright and obvious. But there was no answer when Tess knocked.

She sat down next to the door, and felt a small relief that she could stall the meeting for a little while longer.

Ever since Kenny Kendall had said from across a pane of plexiglass, "I know who you are," Tess had known she would have to confront Candace someday about their

connection. But she felt no more ready to do so now than she had in the prison. And her first goal couldn't be to apologize, anyway. She needed Candace to agree to the profile first. She needed Candace's story. The other could come later.

Tess's plan for what she would say when Candace showed up was only two layers deep. The first layer began and ended with "please." "Please talk to me, even though you've been telling me for weeks with your silence that you don't want to." "Please let me do a thing that will help me immensely and you perhaps not at all."

The second layer was basically a guilt trip. "If you tell your story, you'll be protecting others. Even your own daughters." Tess wasn't sure she really believed in layer two, and though it might be effective, she didn't want to use it.

After that, there was what. Begging? Tess feared that she would be just as easy to dismiss in person as she had been from afar. In that way, too, sitting and waiting was better than forcing the encounter. When she was rebuffed, it would be like falling from a lesser height.

People's footsteps sounded on the concrete stairs with reverberating thumps. They passed by in both directions, but paid Tess very little mind. It seemed to be the sort of place where people didn't concern themselves with their neighbors' business. Maybe that's why Candace was here. Tess wondered how many people in this complex read *American Moment*. Would her story upend Candace's world again? Make her feel more singled out than she already did? What right did Tess have to do that, really? Only, she supposed, as much right as Candace was willing to give her. Tess continued to wait.

Candace arrived eventually, of course. Up the steps thumped a young woman with wispy blonde hair and doughy cheeks. She was in a loose-fitting dress and immensely pregnant. A plastic grocery sack dangled from the knuckles of one hand, and in the other she held the fingers of a small child. A little girl in pink overalls, with wispy blonde hair and tiny, doughy cheeks. When Candace saw Tess, she stopped.

"Who are you?" said Candace.

"My name is Tess Mendoza," said Tess. She struggled back onto her feet, knees grown recalcitrant during her wait. "I'm a reporter. I've been trying to get in touch with you for a while."

"You're the one who keeps emailing Randy," said Candace. "I told him I was done talking to reporters. I think all the others gave up already."

"Well, I guess before I gave up, I wanted to hear it from you. Directly."

Candace looked Tess over. Her daughter picked her nose bashfully and practiced standing on one foot. Candace asked, "Are you like me?"

"I'm pregnant," said Tess. "Probably not like you though. Except sometimes I'm certain that it is. It's scary. There's no way to know for sure."

Candace climbed the rest of the way up the stairs and fished in the grocery sack for her door key. "It's not that scary. There are lots of scary things, but not that."

"Maybe you can teach me."

Candace's daughter said in a small voice, "Momma, need to wee."

"Just a second, honey," Candace answered. She slid her key into the lock and turned back to Tess. "Do you have a car? I could use help picking up the other girls if you have a car."

"I have a car."

"Okay. I guess you should come in, then," said Candace, and opened the door.

For a time after she was rescued from Camp Kendall, Candace lived alone. Her children were initially placed in a shelter, awaiting foster care. It took weeks for the attorneys general to determine that she was in no way complicit in the mutilation of her four daughters. But now the family is back together, living in an apartment on court-supplied housing vouchers.

Her oldest child, Florence (Johnnie Montross's mother's name), has started kindergarten. The two middle children, Lauren and Emily, spend their days in nursery school. Amanda, currently the youngest, stays with her mother. Amanda likes lizards and Band-Aids, hates wearing socks, and expresses ambivalence about her younger sister, whom she doesn't yet know, but who will be showing up in less than a month. Candace plans to name her newest daughter Hope, and the explanation she gives for why she chose the name, and what it means to her, is unimpeachably sincere.

"I'll go on the pill after Hope is born," she says. "I don't know if for forever, but I've got a lot on my plate right now."

It's true. In the evening, as Florence fills a dinosaur coloring book and Lauren and Emily play an imagination game using dish towels and Amanda as props, Candace studies for her GED. She does this every night before she puts her daughters to bed. The family lives in a two-bedroom apartment, and all the children sleep together in one of the rooms, on a pair of bunk beds. Candace is going to put a crib in her bedroom when Hope arrives.

Candace doesn't agree with Representative Hock's assessment that her daughters are merely younger versions of her. When asked about it, she doesn't discuss epigenetics, or use the phrase "nature versus nurture." She says, "No one's gonna take them to church when they're eleven and never let them leave. That happened to me, and it's not gonna to them." She puts her hand on her pregnant belly. "And there's stuff happened to them that didn't happen to me. And they have each other, but I only had myself. So it's not the same at all."

Candace doesn't lose any of her day worrying that her children may fail to develop unique identities. She's too busy keeping Amanda's shoes tied, consoling Emily that not every night can be macaroni and cheese night, comforting Lauren when a pen leaks on her favorite shirt, and convincing Florence not to use the profanity she's learning at school. "They look a lot alike, but not that much, because they're different ages. I never confuse them. I bet it's worse with twins."

During the day, when three of her girls are at school, Candace does all of the same budgeting and cleaning and logistics that get done by single mothers everywhere in the country. And when she's not doing that, she's meeting with attorneys and preparing to testify in court. Candace is a witness in two ongoing criminal trials.

She is a witness for the prosecution in the trial against Kenny Kendall, who made the decision to have her previous pregnancy aborted and her children sterilized. Since the surgeon among Kendall's flock who actually performed the operations took his own life in the police raid on the compound, Kendall is the only one on trial for that crime. He is charged with five felony counts, and under Texas law he will face life in prison if convicted. "It's what he wanted for me," says Candace of Kendall's potential fate. "Life in prison. I'm just trying to return the favor."

The other trial Candace is involved in is that of her father. In her father's trial, however, she is a witness for the defense.

"It's not that I like him," she explains. "That's not the point."

The point is that, of all the horrors Candace has experienced—in many of which her father was, in fact, complicit—the one he is charged with never actually happened.

The police, as a matter of course in a child abuse raid, took DNA samples from the suspects and victims. Candace's children share her genetic code. As a result, a standard paternity test will identify Candace's father as her children's father as well. Remarkably, the district attorney has chosen, on the basis of this evidence, to charge Candace's father with incest.

The case is ludicrous. It is an attempt to punish the guilty not through accountability, but by using legal precedent to subvert reality. But why is Candace, specifically, coming by choice to her father's defense?

"It's part he didn't do it. There's enough things that actually happened, why go making up ones that didn't. But it's also," she pauses, looks for the words. "It's also

that he has no claim on them. On my girls. He doesn't have a claim, and Johnnie doesn't have a claim, and no one does. No one but me."

So it is that Candace goes to court, defending a father she hates to protect the children she loves, as a statement to the world that she is their mother; she alone, and no one is ever again allowed to come between them.

"Have you forgotten there's somewhere we need to be? Let's go!" said Judy.

"I'm coming," Tess called down the stairs. "I was still getting ready."

Tess met Judy in the garage, resigned but bitter.

"What are you wearing?"

Tess had changed clothes a half-dozen times, stripping outfits off as soon as she finished putting them on. There was no pattern to it. When Judy's forbearance had stretched as far as it could, Tess finally found herself downstairs, wearing a beige cashmere sweater. No particular reason why. She said, "I was cold. This is comfortable."

"It's ninety degrees out."

"Why do you care what I'm wearing? Aren't you the one in a big hurry to get this done?"

They got in the car and headed toward BioPeek, an ultrasound imaging center in a nearby strip mall. Tess had delayed and delayed her sonogram, and finally canceled. She claimed she was too focused on writing the article. Then that she was too stressed waiting for the article to run. But it was up now, and Tess had no more excuses, and Judy no more patience. The obstetrician couldn't see her for another week, so BioPeek it was.

As they rode to the mall, Tess said, "It's a lie. People will be able to tell it's a lie."

"It's not a lie. Why this again?"

"There were things I left out. Similarities. Lots of them. Those girls finished each other's sentences, but I didn't write about that."

"Of course there were similarities. They're all twin sisters, sort of. You'd expect there to be similarities. You and your brother have similarities, don't you? Hell, my stepsister and I have similarities, and we're not even related." Judy pounded the horn and swerved lanes. "That part doesn't matter. What you wrote matters."

But ever since the article ran, Tess couldn't stop thinking about what she might have missed. She thought about the uncanny moments when the children would laugh in unison. About how Florence sneezed the same truncated squeak as her mother, just higher pitched. How did she know that was just normal twin stuff? Normal daughter stuff? She'd worked so hard to be authoritative, but what could you tell from a child? How would she even know normal if she saw it?

No one could say for sure how GDS kids were going to grow up. It had never happened before. There could be clear, obvious changes, ones that only manifested with age. Everything she'd written could end up looking quaint. Laughable. Catastrophically wrong.

Tess thought of Candace's reaction when she finally told her about Kendall. How Kendall had recognized her and why. They were sitting on Candace's narrow balcony, eating pasta out of blue plastic bowls. Through the sliding glass door Tess could see the little blonde heads of the children, shrieking as they scurried across the thin carpet in their last ecstatic burst before bedtime.

"Just like a herd of puppies," Candace said. "Way they run over each other." She ate another forkful of noodles. "There were dogs all over at the camp. Always puppies around."

The interviews were over. Tess had all she needed to write the article. She put her bowl down and said, "There's something you need to know."

"What is it?"

"It's about Kenny. I've been writing about people like you, like the kids, for a long time. I have a lot of stories about it online. And Kenny, he used to get on the computer and go

looking for things he didn't like." Tess paused, listened to the muffled giggles and declarations from inside the apartment. "He told me that he learned about it from my stories," Tess told Candace. "He figured out what was happening with you because of me. So, in a certain way . . . I mean. I had a role in what happened. So I'm sorry for that."

Candace hadn't thought much of the coincidence. She tucked her hair behind her ear, hugged her belly and said, "If not you, it would have been somebody else. I was different. Kenny didn't like things different. Something was bound to happen eventually."

The more Tess thought about it, the more true it was. Candace was the future because the world was full of people who didn't like things to be different. Tess had argued, as forcefully as she knew how to, as forcefully as Lynette would let her, that in every way that mattered they were the same. That there were no real differences.

But what if the truth was actually that there were just no *important* differences? And what if unimportant but visible was really all it took? How could you know it wasn't futile to counter novelty with humanity? How could you know that, for all your intentions, you weren't setting yourself up for a fall?

Under the chilly blast from the car's air conditioning, Tess was sweating.

When they got to BioPeek and signed in, Judy waved away the clipboard of forms. She produced from her bag a set she'd downloaded, printed, and already filled out. The nurses had Tess in the back and on the exam table in under five minutes.

"This is going to be a bit gooey," said the ultrasound technician as she squirted gel onto Tess's skin and spread it around with the end of the wand. Some of the gel got on her sweater, and Tess could feel Judy biting back commentary. Her grip tightened around Judy's hand. The wand could have been the flat of a blade and Tess didn't think she would feel any differently.

When Tess was sufficiently slimed, the technician started up the machine. Ghostly shadows resolved on the screen. It looked like nothing in particular, a confusion of internal architecture, until the technician pointed to a part of the haze and said, "There's the head." Then suddenly the image resolved into a moving cross-section of a fetus, and it was impossible to see it as anything else. The plane of the scan swept through the baby's body, forward and back, hands and feet coalescing into view and then dissolving again. The technician pushed some buttons, and a 3-D computer rendering appeared on the screen. It looked like a clay model put under running water. She panned the image to get a view between the legs.

"And there we have it. It's a girl."

"Look at that." Judy's voice was a rush of astonished delight. "Decaf's a girl. We have a lumpy little daughter."

Tess felt the startled-fish flutter of Decaf moving, and simultaneously watched her on the screen twist her hips out of view, as if shy. A motion, Tess realized, she knew. A gesture she'd felt so many times.

"We can burn a movie of this to DVD for you to buy, if you want," said the technician.

A noise escaped from Tess's chest. A wracked sound that convulsed her body and scrambled the image on the screen. It happened again, and then again.

"What is it?" said Judy. "Are you okay?"

Tess started to answer, but the words got caught and bubbled in her nose. She clapped her hands to her face in embarrassment. Her cheeks were wet.

"Leave us alone for a minute," Judy told the technician, who put down the wand and started for the door.

"No," Tess finally got out. "Come back. It's fine." She couldn't tell if the technician listened or not. Her vision was too watery to see. Under Judy's hand on her shoulder, her body still shook with sobs.

"It's all right," she gasped. "There's nothing wrong. Nothing is wrong." ○

DAY JOB

Tom Purdom

Tom Purdom recently gave a talk on writing about music at the Curtis Institute of Music, which, he tells us, “is a lot like giving a talk on writing about military affairs at West Point.” A collection of Tom’s Casanova stories will be out soon from Fantastic Books.

These tales all had their first appearances in *Asimov’s*. In his latest story, the author looks at how technological developments may affect the way we deal with dangerous situations in the not too distant future.

Len approached Dr. Shinwalai’s practice because Toni told him he should. He had just lost his job again—his third job in the two years and ten months Len and Toni had been connected. He called BonG Temp two hours after he received his termination speech, but that wasn’t good enough for Toni. There was no future in temp, Toni insisted. He needed a real full time job, he couldn’t get a real job that lasted until he did something about his problem, *ergo* . . .

Toni liked to say *ergo*. She was the only person Len had ever met who could say *ergo* three times in a half hour conversation about the best place to spend a weekend in Jakarta.

The exit officer who gave Len the bad news had said the same thing. “We knew you could be a problem,” the exit officer told him. “We wouldn’t have hired you if you weren’t so good. We took a chance. Somebody should tell you you’re running out of people who can take a chance.”

Dr. Shinwalai’s pixeldoll looked like a friendly woman a little older than Toni. Len knew he was talking to a bunch of pixels but that didn’t bother him. He had been talking to pixels all his life. He had messed up a few, too.

Rafe Bardena got Len’s case because he was next in line. Two clients in Rafe’s consignment had completed their procedures the day before, bringing his case list down to 187, three short of his quota. Rafe gave Len the opening script, explained the fee schedule (that part went better if people felt they were talking to a live unsimulated human), and outlined the next step.

“This may be the only time you’ll have to physically visit us. We need a brain scan and some blood and tissue samples. The scan takes about five minutes. It’s so bland some people think we should add blinking lights just to let the customers feel like something’s happening.”

The *may* in the first sentence was part of the script. Rafe could have said it would *probably* be the only time Len would have to visit the practice, but a lot of people interpreted that as “never.” The rest was mostly chatter—part of the cluster of personality traits that got Rafe his job. Len just nodded, so Rafe switched to his straight all-business mode.

Dr. Shinwalai got a full summary of Len's test results. Rafe received a less technical version. Len's troubles with personal relations could be traced to two sources: the brain structures responsible for emotional control and the brain structures and chemical pathways responsible for the useful human trait called empathy. They were both underdeveloped. Not horribly underdeveloped. There were lots of people with bigger deficits in those areas. Len ranked near the top of the bottom fourth. He could handle temp work. He could work in a place for six weeks and most of the people he worked with would still think he was a tolerable human being when he left.

Rafe's case list normally included at least thirty people with the same problem. The recommended procedure was called drug-enhanced simulation-based cognitive behavioral therapy.

"It usually takes about twenty sessions with the simulations," Rafe said. "Thirty at the most. We recommend no more than two sessions a week. Spaced so they're at least two days apart. You control the schedule."

Len nodded. Some people made little jokes. Some people prepared lists of questions in advance. Len just nodded.

Rafe didn't tell him some of the cost would be covered by the federal and state agencies that ran anti-violence programs. That wasn't part of the informed consent procedure. The information was publicly available on the agency websites and you could therefore assume the prospective consumer knew it. The agencies were particularly interested in noddors.

The temp jobs were mostly routine stuff. The customer gave Len a target and he attacked it. Most of the time he didn't penetrate. His employers were testing their defenses against low-level penetrators. They just wanted to make sure all the standard alarms and traps were working.

He really liked working inside, creating serious defenses. That was his real talent, not attacking. Everybody admitted he was good at it. So why should it matter what kind of a personality he had? Why couldn't people put up with a little interpersonal friction?

He couldn't be the first techie who told Jodie Freere she was doing something dumb. You would think a security manager with her experience would have gotten used to it. In her case, in fact, it must have happened a lot.

The exit officer had claimed they weren't letting him go just because he'd reminded Jodie she wasn't as bright as she thought she was. Len's remark was part of a "pattern." They always said that. But somehow they didn't notice the pattern until he got a little grumpy with some "team leader" type.

Maybe he should stick to temp work. They gave him a target and he went after it. All by himself. He deserved something better. He had a *right* to something better. But maybe he should settle for what he could get.

But then he'd have to give up Toni. "This stuff really works," Toni insisted. "You don't have to spend your life doing things just because your parents messed you up or you got genes that gave you a certain kind of brain. You can do something about it. We're the first people in the whole history of the Earth that can do something about it."

It didn't take much to get Toni started. She'd had some kind of problem with her father—something that had led her into "overly dependent relationships," according to her version of her life story. Now she was all right. Now she could walk away from a relationship if she decided it wasn't giving her what she wanted.

She didn't say she would walk away from Len if he didn't get himself transformed. She wasn't that type. But that was the message, wasn't it? He wasn't the only guy in the world with a lean body and a great pair of pecs.

* * *

Rafe had gone through three months' training before he started working with patients. Dr. Shinwalai loaned him the fee, with an agreement she would cancel 4 percent of his debt every month he worked for her. The training took him through so many simulations the real people on his screen couldn't have been simulations and he wouldn't have known the difference.

For Rafe it was a day job—well paid, some freedom to schedule his hours, something he could do from his own apartment. Right now, in his *primary* career, he was working on a five-guest dinner party for a guy who lived in a two bedroom apartment in Portsmouth, VA. It was a simple thing, but everything had to be done right—food, wine, a good conversation script. His fee wouldn't cover four hours of the wages Dr. Shinwalai paid him, but that was the way it went. He was a chamber planner, and you only made money on small scale events if you got a really rich customer. Chamber planning didn't make sense financially, but it took a planner who could turn minimum resources into something people would remember all their lives.

Rafe had been planning events since he was a kid. He had planned his own eighth birthday party. He did parties for younger kids when he was eleven. It was an art form—the art of living.

It was a great relationship—the best relationship Len had stumbled into. They didn't live together but Len spent a lot of time in Toni's apartment. She had even installed an ALT8 mega-immersive game system so he would have something to do when she was plugged into her office playing financial games with the consumer bio industry. The brunches and late night treats they ordered went on her account, too.

But she was still just a financial analyst six years out of school. She wanted to travel—great trips with the two of them hitting the trendiest places and bouncing in the best hotel beds. They could do it if he would get himself settled into a permanent job.

Women always wanted you to be different. You spent all that time in the gym building up a hard body and great chest muscles just because women didn't like men with soft bodies and flat chests. What were you supposed to do with all that muscle and hardness? But it was what they wanted. Then when they got you all shaped up physically, they started thinking your brain could use a little work, too.

Whatever happened, he still had Captain Clark. He hadn't told the pixeldolls about Captain Clark. Rafe didn't know about him. Neither did Toni. Toni didn't know about Gloria either. He had told the interview pixeldoll about Gloria, though. It had asked him about "previous relationships" and why they had ended. And he had given it the answer it wanted. It wasn't hard to figure out what programs wanted. Programs were logical. You could always figure out the logic if you tried. You couldn't do that with people.

Dr. Shinwalai could track a thousand patients because her IT system did most of the work. The IT could tell her and the aides when anything looked like somebody should give it some personal attention.

But Dr. Shinwalai didn't leave it at that. She looked at every case every two or three weeks whatever the IT indicated. She was a hard worker—bony, intense, the kind of person who started working at six in the morning and kept it up when most sane people were lying back in their recliners watching other people do things. Her parents had emigrated from Afghanistan eight years before she was born. Her online stuff included a video she made on her mother's seventieth birthday, praising her mother for insisting her daughters had to "buckle down and make full use of all the opportunities we have."

So Rafe wasn't surprised when she asked him about Len right after Len finished his fourteenth session. She had noticed the same thing he had. Len wasn't making

the kind of progress the IT had predicted when he finished his diagnostic sims. The numbers were moving in the right direction but they weren't moving far enough.

"Have you picked up any signs there's something we've missed, Rafe?"

"I haven't picked up much of anything. He's a nodder. You give him the info and he nods. You ask him what he thinks of the sims and he shrugs and tells you it gets a little edgy now and then but he thinks he can take it."

"And what do you think of that? How do you feel about him personally?"

Rafe frowned. He had been caught off guard the first time she had asked him about his personal feelings about a case, but he could understand why it might be useful.

"He's a case. He's an extreme case—I'd say he's the number one nodder on my load right now. Out of thirty-eight. I wouldn't want to have to buy him a beer. But he hasn't done anything that makes me wish I didn't have to deal with him."

"I think you should try to give him some extra face time. He's improved, but the improvement moved him into a tricky area. We'll have to consider a DPT if he doesn't advance out of that space. But it will have to be a judgment call. It won't be mandatory. You can't have too much information when you're making judgment calls."

DPT meant "direct physiological transformation." Sometimes it involved real surgery—the kind where they opened up your head. Mostly it meant injections with programmed devices and permanent "enhancements" of your biochemistry.

Strange as it might seem, the sims could trigger permanent physical changes without that kind of physical tampering. Rafe's training had given him some familiarity with the theory. Intense childhood experiences could mess up the systems that produced the neurotransmitters responsible for useful emotions like empathy and affection. Traumatic adult experiences could have the same effect. Simulated experiences could reverse some of the effects. But the procedure only worked if the drugs created the right kind of feelings while you were immersed in the sim. Remove the drugs from the process and some of Len's sims looked like comic attempts to teach a child common sense manners.

Right now, Captain Clark was playing around in a cozy where the only buildings were castles surrounded by forests and the only inhabitants were handsome counts and beautiful countesses. Most of the counts and countesses were physical blobs in their so-called real lives—you didn't have to hack their IDs to know that. Len had given Captain Clark a balloon belly for this infiltration. And pigged his head.

The blobs had tried to ban the captain when they discovered he didn't share their view of the world but they were protected by the kind of low budget security arrangements most cozies opted for. They could turn their backs when he sauntered into one of their balls but they couldn't keep him out.

He liked to pick out a group that looked like they'd spent real money on their visuals. He walked right up to the fanciest looking group in the hall and slapped the first woman in range on the back.

"So how's the harvest doing, my lady? Are the peasants in good voice when they sing their happy harvest songs?"

My lady slipped away from him without turning around. Most of the others wandered off the way they usually did—as if they had just noticed something interesting was happening somewhere else. One popped out of existence.

One almost always stayed. This time it was a woman—presumably—who had draped a slim simbody in a tunic-and-tights outfit no real lady would have worn in the centuries when real lords ruled real castles.

It went the way it always did. She let him know her "biological persona" was just as slim as her pixeldoll when he gave her a few words about overweight, out-of-

breath flabbies and he hit the target dead on when he guessed she was old instead of fat. And that left her with the usual three options. Attack him. Defend herself. Walk away. Number three was her best bet. Number two was best for him. Number one was good enough.

They hardly ever walked away. They stood there, plugging away, *reasoning* with you, getting more and more agitated, acting just like ants and beetles when you prodded them with a pin, or ducks when you threw a rock into their pond.

Clöre Endotter had monitored Rafe's training. Clöre Endotter was Dr. Shinwalai's general administrative officer. She liked to joke that she could be the chief administrative officer but a C-level title seemed pretentious when you were the *only* administrative officer. Clöre believed everybody who worked for the practice should understand the economics.

"Once upon a time a psychiatrist could have handled a fifty patient caseload," Clöre said in her briefing. "At most. Every patient had to see the psychiatrist once or twice a week for an hour. The doctor had to charge them ten times what we charge them in today's money. We're going through the same process agriculture and manufacturing went through in the last three centuries. Three hundred years ago, 80 percent of the population had to spend their lives growing food. Now 2 percent of the labor force produces all the food we need—more than we need, judging by all the diet programs people buy. Five percent produce all the manufactured goods we buy. Now we're going through the same process in fields like psychiatry and education."

The practice wasn't exactly a cooperative. Clöre and Dr. Shinwalai split half the payroll—27 percent for the doctor, 23 for the general administrative officer, from what they posted. The five aides split the other half.

"Everybody wins," Clöre said. "The treatments are so cheap there's no reason anybody has to suffer from phobias, compulsions, personality disorders, all the things that used to make millions of people miserable—along with most of the people they knew. And we all make more money than we would have, doing something that's a bit more interesting—I hope you'll agree—than growing wheat and rice day after day."

Len didn't do Captain Clark intrusions when he was hanging around Toni's place. The stuff he did with the ALT8 system was strictly physical. The ALT8 system was ten times better than the 6 he'd installed in his apartment—so real it blocked out everything. Toni always worked in her bedroom when she was doing her financial stuff, but she could pop out of her work cocoon at any time and hear him saying the wrong things if he activated Captain Clark though the ALT8. Toni claimed she really liked watching him move, even if she couldn't see the things he was fighting, just him, surrounded by sensor poles, maneuvering on the big deck with the neat, well balanced sword and shield he'd picked when she bought the system. She would sneak into the living room and he would turn the system off and see her sprawled in one of her recliners, like an empress viewing a gladiator.

"I love watching men do stuff like that," Toni said. "It's what you were made for."

You could check Len's progress with a single glance at the screen. Dr. Shinwalai had even placed an orange line on Len's chart. If Len made it to the right side of that line, he was in the clear—another successful transformation, even if he hadn't turned into the kind of guy you would pick for a weekend sojourn in a mountain cabin. Left of that line, he was still inside the "tricky area" Dr. Shinwalai wanted to avoid.

It was a tricky area because it meant a direct physiological transformation was desirable but you couldn't say it was necessary. But there was more to it than that. The

personalities that inhabited the tricky area created a problem for the anti-violence programs. If the IT had placed Len further left, Dr. Shinwalai could have told him he should have a direct physiological transformation for his own protection—and the protection of the people he might harm. If it had placed him *way* left, the DPT would have been mandatory.

Was Len a dangerous person who could erupt into violence? Or was he just an annoying pest who alienated people because he hadn't developed a normal ability to feel the things they felt and linked that feeling to a normal ability to control his impulses when he realized he might be triggering an unpleasant reaction? Somebody had to make a judgment.

"Manija thinks you should look at Len Morton's sims," Clore Endotter said. "She wonders if there's anything in there the IT hasn't taken into account."

Clore always called Dr. Shinwalai Manija. Rafe knew her friends called her Mani, but Clore apparently felt she should maintain a line between business and personal relationships, even if she spent more time with Dr. Shinwalai than anybody either of them knew.

"Is there something special I should look for?"

"We'd just like you to let us know if you see anything that doesn't feel right. Cast a wide net. We'd appreciate it if you could let us have a report within ten days."

It started in the first years in school, in Len's opinion. Girls were good at going to school. People who were good at going to school got to keep on going to school. People who spent a lot of time in schools got all the good jobs.

Boys weren't good at sitting in silly little desks staring at screens filled with stuff other people thought they should look at. Boys had muscles and reflexes. Boys liked hitting balls and shooting things. He got the basic pieces of paper the schools handed out. But none of the papers got him a job. He got jobs because he'd hung around with a crowd that liked to harass people who posted stupid brags online. Then he learned he could launch attacks for money, without running the risk a judge would run him through a reeducation program.

Toni said she felt like she was watching a "mating display" when she saw him work out with the ALT8. "It's like watching a big bird do one of those mating dances male birds do," Toni said.

Toni liked that evolution stuff, male animals putting on fights to show the females they had the right kind of genes, male birds dancing and strutting in front of the hens. Like he wouldn't have been gaming if she hadn't been there. Like he lived his whole life just to get women to lie down and be nice to him.

The first time she told him he should do it with his shirt off, he joked about it, holding up the sword and shield and flexing his arms like he was showing off his biceps. That was just before he lost his job. The next three or four times he let it ride. Then she said it one time too many.

"How about naked?" he said.

"Mmmmm."

Later, after she had finished another work session, he had pinned her arms against the bed and let her feel his weight and the full strength of his muscles. A look had flickered across her face and he had realized he was giving her a scare. Then she gasped. And he concentrated on giving her the one thing he knew they all wanted.

He had seen that same look on Gloria's face. Had she been afraid, too?

It was the first time he had wondered about that. He hadn't been thinking about Gloria's feelings at the time. He just wanted her to shut up. She shut up and they had the kind of time they usually had.

Was that why she'd brought out the heavy infantry when she'd disconnected the relationship? Because she'd been afraid?

They had told him the transformation would make him feel things other people felt. He had understood that. He could see how it could be a useful piece of equipment. He had already developed a knack for predicting how people would react, just by watching them, with no help from anybody. He'd be dead right every time if he could actually feel what they were feeling. How strong did the feelings get? Did you have to spend your life being bombarded by every loony fear everybody felt?

Rafe had to fit the sim review into the open spaces in his schedule, but that was standard operating procedure. Dr. Shinwalai believed it was better to have too many aides than too few, so there were periods, almost every shift, when he was on standby, available if anybody on his load needed personal attention.

There was no way he could look at every minute Len had spent with the sims in the time Clore had given him. He could have asked her for some overtime, but overtime violated his principles. This was a day job. It wasn't his career.

He looked over the list of sim situations and picked four that seemed like they might tell him something about Len's capacity for violence. The sims were primarily supposed to be transformative but they were also diagnostic. The IT evaluated Len's reactions and based the next step on its conclusions.

Rafe had never had any trouble picking up other people's feelings. That was one of his strengths, according to the personality evaluation he had been given when Dr. Shinwalai hired him. It was also one of his handicaps. It was easier to think up new ideas for events when you weren't constantly fretting about the customer's reactions. He had learned that he had to block out that part of his personality—forcefully—when he was operating in his creative mode.

But that was him. He was hyper-sensitive. Len couldn't hear 90 percent of the messages the people around him transmitted. Len didn't feel the pain he inflicted on the people who wandered into his orbit at the wrong moment.

Len's empathy quotient had definitely improved. The IT had moved him to a better position mostly because he had indicated his information processors were picking up more signals. His capacity for violence was another matter.

Toni really did want him to prance around the game stage naked. You'd look great, she said. It's what you're made for. It doesn't matter if it's imaginary. You're still doing everything guys were made to do.

He told her they could both get naked and fight side by side but that didn't appeal to her. She wasn't a gamer. She just wanted to watch him. With the accent on him.

So why not watch naked? But that didn't appeal to her either.

He took off his shirt just to make her happy. He built up sweat when he hit a really violent part so that made sense. But it wasn't what she really wanted. He'd be cutting and blocking enemies right and left, totally absorbed, and he'd hear her, piercing through the sound effects, clapping her hands like a schoolgirl, yelling: Take it off! Take it off!

Rafe had picked two of the sims from the last seven on Len's record. In one of them, a woman pushed through a crowd boarding a train and shouldered a man out of her way. The second was the next to last sim in Rafe's file—an altercation between a soft-spoken, ultra-calm young man and a young woman who reacted to a political discussion by throwing a drink at him. Neither one involved serious violence.

The sims had taken Len through both sides of each scene several times. His physiological indicators jumped when he played the scenes for the first time, from the male viewpoint, but they settled down as he worked through the repeats.

The sims both looked forced. Rafe had seen guys get so hyped-up they had to be separated before they started throwing punches. But throw a drink? That looked like something you did back in the days when people fought sword duels.

The angry political debater hadn't been a guy, of course. Did that make a difference?

He put the summaries of the last seven sims on his screen. Five involved interactions with women. Four could be classed as sims focused on violence. Had the IT picked up something about Len's attitudes toward women?

Clore had asked him to look at the sims. She hadn't said anything about anything else. Should he just tell her he thought they should look at Len's relations with women? And let Dr. Shinwalai follow up if she wanted to?

Len was hooked up with somebody named Toni. That had come out in their welcome talk. Toni was supposed to be the main reason Len was doing this. The intake interviews with the IT included her last name and some stuff on her job—enough he could be sure a search would give him the right Toni.

Dr. Toni Levitsky, senior financial analyst, Waterstone and Ming Financial Services. About six years experience, four with Waterstone and Ming.

It wasn't hard to figure out the basis of the relationship. Toni had a good salary, with good prospects, and Len obviously worked at looking good.

Rafe had been offered a couple of shots at that kind of setup. But he liked more companionable relationships. With somebody at his own level.

Was Toni trying to turn Len into somebody more companionable? At her level? Len hadn't given the IT any information about Toni's attitude. He had just said he was trying the transformation because Toni wanted it.

The only other woman Len had mentioned was named Gloria. He broke up with Gloria, Len said, because they were "rubbing each other the wrong way."

"We probably had too much in common," Len had told the pixeldoll that took his intake history. "She's in security, too—guard work. At a data center."

It was one of the few times Len had offered any information without being prodded with a direct question.

Rafe had been searching the text version of the interview for references to women. He switched to the visual record and watched the exchange that included that earth-shaking bit of unsolicited self-revelation.

"Have you had any other relationships that lasted more than a year?"

"Sure."

"Can you tell me why the last one didn't last?"

"Gloria—we rubbed each other the wrong way."

Len had hesitated. A long hesitation. He shrugged several times when he threw in the stuff about both of them working in security. He didn't shrug like that normally, one shrug after another. He was talking faster, too.

The pixeldoll had waited while he hesitated. As if the IT had decided it should see if Len would fill in the silence. The doll had put on a neutral face and created a vacuum waiting to be filled.

Had the IT behaved that way because it was picking up something subtle? Something that wouldn't show up in its standardized summary?

There were thousands of Glorias who lived in reasonable proximity to Len. And thousands of data centers, all over the world, she could be watching from her home. The IT spent five minutes of its valuable time locating three prospects.

Gloria Butler was twenty years too old. Gloria Wittelstein claimed she was an actress and didn't mention her day job on any of her pages. She might be somebody who would irritate Len because she was so relentlessly sociable, but would he claim they had too much in common?

Gloria Terreli was almost invisible. She showed up on a list of employees and that was about it. Len was more visible, but not much. They were two of a kind, like he said.

Len had tested the sword in a physical store before he had bought it. Toni could have ordered a sword and shield online when she ordered the ALT8 system but he had insisted a system like that deserved a personally fitted weapon. The sword had real weight—just the right weight for his muscles. The internal electronics would have fooled a Viking. He could feel the difference between the way bone crunched under the blade when he brought it down on a collarbone and the way flesh yielded to metal when he drove it into an exposed stomach.

It was all an illusion, of course. The sword was cutting through empty air—through the pixeldolls created by his helmet. But it still felt good. And he still had Captain Clark when he went home. The pixeldolls Captain Clark harried had real people hiding behind them. Nobody yelled “Take it off!” just when he was getting so immersed he could forget Toni and Gloria and all the rest of them even existed.

Gloria might be invisible, but her two brothers were normal share-it-with-the-world humans. They were both real-world gamers—soccer seven months of the year, team racquet sports the rest of the time. They posted images of trophies. They shared videos of their best moments. The oldest brother, Jan Terreli, had a wife who felt the world desperately needed a complete picture of the celebrated Terreli family—favorite beers, top ten on everybody’s play list, Little Jan’s ninth birthday party, Aunt Gloria’s presents . . .

There were no pictures of Aunt Gloria. She just sent presents. There were references to Aunt Gloria’s boyfriend but Len didn’t receive any mentions by name. Still, for all that, the text and video references totaled almost a thousand items. Rafe tried to narrow the list by searching for references to “boyfriend” and key words related to violence and arguments. Nothing popped up. The violence searches flooded him with comments on game sims. The Terreli kids liked violent games.

He hopped to the last reference to Gloria’s boyfriend. It had been posted forty-two months ago—about the time Len should have broken up with her, given the time Len had been linked with Toni. Rafe jumped back two weeks and started plodding, day by day, through the mass of information the Terrelis added to the world’s knowledge of Everyday Life in the Age of Infinite Storage Capacity.

Pixeldolls always looked wonderful when they danced. It wasn’t hard. You activated the right program and your doll did what it was supposed to, no matter what you did. You stood on the mat, moving your hands and feet, and the software translated your shuffles into precise, elegant dance steps. And there you were, whirling around a ballroom with your partner, surrounded by straight backs and poised heads, with no hint you were all slouching big bellies shuffling around your home stages dressed in bathrobes and exercise suits.

And here came Captain Clark, dancing with a naked slave girl, bumping into people right and left, until a dozen of them turned on him, yelling all the standard insults, claiming they were going to find out who he was and make him wish he’d never touched a sim system. And poof! he was gone. Right at the very peak of their frenzy.

Jan and Jerry had to pass up the Wednesday night Wine and Dine so they could settle a little boyfriend problem Gloria was having but they’ll be gourmeting with the pack next week. Bon voyage, Captain Clark.

So Gloria had a “boyfriend problem” right around the time she and Len had broken up and her brothers had “settled” it. They could have helped her move

out—but Len didn't live with Toni and Rafe couldn't find any evidence he had lived with Gloria.

And what was the reference to Captain Clark all about?

Ask for information on Captain Clark and you got several million responses, starting with Meriwether Lewis' partner and continuing with everybody, real or fictional, who had ever held that rank under that name in any military force. Eliminating all the Captain Clarks who were born before the turn of the century reduced the number of references to 896,736.

It could be a *nomme de guerre*. That was an obvious thought. Gamers liked to stick military titles on their pixeldoll façades. Len had picked an aristocratic title for the character he controlled in an ALT8 game that seemed to involve all the standard elements. Count Jackal was a lone-warrior character who roamed the landscape with three robots Len had purchased from the game's central pool—a set of choices that fitted his personality structure. Captain Clark had the same uninspired quality.

Toni was wearing her robe—a long robe, ankle length and heavy, but you knew there wasn't anything under it but her. "You wouldn't feel like coming by, would you, Len? I've been cooped up here working since yesterday morning."

"In your bathrobe?"

"I just took a shower. I could use a break."

It was four-ten in the afternoon. "I've got an intrusion I'm supposed to do this evening. Early. I have to do that."

"So I'll get in some more work while you're doing that."

"Can you send a car?"

"How soon can you use it?"

"Can you tolerate ten minutes?"

"I think I can handle that. It might take an effort. But I can handle it."

He had been planning on a session with the sims when he finished the intrusion. But that was up to her. She could have him work on his sims or she could have him hop in a car and take care of her current urges. She got what she wanted. They always got what they wanted.

Captain Clark has slain his tenth Yessel . . . Captain Clark put up a good fight but . . . Do you really think any male in this universe can withstand the guns of Captain Clark? . . .

Every battleground and cozy in the Alternate Universe seemed to host at least one Captain Clark. The bigger alternates hosted dozens, with initials and first names most of them ignored most of the time.

There were a lot of reasons people hid behind pixeldolls and fancy-dress names. Some people were just shy. Some people wanted to say what they thought without worrying about the consequences. But Len hadn't mentioned Captain Clark in any of his interactions with the practice . . .

A tap connected him to Clore's in-house mail. "How far do you want me to go with my look at Len Morton? Would it matter if he was doing something online under a pixel ID? And hadn't told us about it?"

It didn't take long. Not in the mood Toni was in. He could have gone home twenty minutes after he stepped into her apartment and done the sim before he did his intrusion. But she wanted him to stay.

"There's no telling how we may feel later, right? After something like that."

She always seemed to think he felt the same things she felt. There was no telling how she might feel later so—*ergo*—he must feel the same way.

They ordered Indonesian takeout and watched a video she liked while they waited for it—a string quartet by some woman named Higdon who was supposed to be a big deal with people who liked that kind of music. The cellist looked nice—a tall blonde who worked her bow like she was playing with a fencing sword. He slouched into his corner of the sofa and passed the time staring at the cellist.

“It isn’t much,” Clore said. “But he didn’t tell us about it. He told us about Count Jackal. But he didn’t mention Captain Clark.”

“It could be perfectly normal,” Rafe said. “I know a lot of people who hide behind fancy-dress IDs just because they don’t want to let everybody in the world know what their opinions are.”

“That doesn’t correlate with his personality structure, Rafe. He wouldn’t hide his connection with Captain Clark just because he wants to keep his opinions private. The thing about Gloria’s brothers raises flags, too.”

“Can we contact her?”

Clore gave him one of her brisk, almost invisible frowns. She didn’t waste time expressing emotions, but Rafe could visualize the conflicts clashing in her head. He had received an overview of the regulations governing the anti-violence programs during his training. Like all regulations, they included a large, foggy area in which the bureaucrats could second-guess your decisions and charge you with the errors.

“We need a stronger rationale,” Clore said. “Manija’s tied up with a conference right now but I know what she’d say. I’m going to authorize a full-charge search for this Captain Clark. You should work with the search agency—helping them zero in on relevant leads. Can you put aside half an hour, starting now?”

Rafe hesitated. “What’s the matter?” Clore said. “You have a deadline on one of your planning projects?”

“I’ve been putting in some extra time on this—more than I planned.”

“It’s only half an hour, Rafe. It might not even take fifteen minutes. We should get this settled. It’s not an emergency but we know what we need to do. Don’t worry about the overtime, if that’s what’s bothering you. We’ll work something out.”

The takeout had been veggie. Toni believed veggie helped you keep your weight down. You wouldn’t want me to be a fatty, would you? Toni said. And you have to keep in shape, too, right?

The wine had been pretty good. He had only drunk two glasses but he was feeling mildly warm all over—warm and relaxed. Toni was leaning against her corner of the couch, staring at her stretched out legs like she felt the same way. She had told him one of her “colleagues” had recommended the wine and it had sounded like it could be the prelude to “something especially nice.”

A buzz from his scheduler interrupted his drift toward the nice something she obviously had in mind.

“I have to do my intrusion.”

Toni ran her hand along her thigh. She blinked twice very hard and reached for the coffee machine built into the coffee table. A demitasse cup popped into her hand and she swigged it down before she grabbed a second cup and handed it to him.

“It’s still early. There’s still wine in the bottle. For later.”

The add-on in the coffee started counteracting the wine add-on seconds after it hit his stomach. The warmth faded. His muscles tightened into the level of tension he considered normal—an above average level according to the tests Dr. Shinwalai’s crew had put him through.

* * *

The tech from the search agency knew his stuff and he came equipped with search programs and specialized hardware that could make the public programs look like they were two decades out of date. He could frame queries with the precision of someone who knew all the quirks built into his systems. But he needed input from a sherpa who understood the details of the search problem—even though Rafe had to tell him he didn't know exactly what they were looking for.

"Then don't give me any guidance at the start," the tech said. "Just let me know when you see something that looks interesting."

The intrusion took over forty-five minutes—almost twice as long as Len had expected. He worked his way past two layers of reactive defenses and spent eight minutes penetrating individual accounts before a financial adviser in Bali noticed one of her accounts had lost three thousand yen.

Toni had retreated to her bedroom work station ten minutes after he started working. He let her know he was through—he even said he was ready for another try at something interesting—but she didn't bother to answer.

You couldn't expect her to interrupt her work just to let him know she'd received his message. *Her* work was important. Millions of dollars, yuans, euros, and yen rested on every recommendation she gave good old Waterstone and Ming. Ms. Ming had even given her a personally signed note praising her for the over-the-benchmark gains her recommendations had made during the last two years.

"She doesn't give those things out every day," Toni had said. "She's letting me know I'm on the inside lane on the promotion track. I told my parents and they both let me know they won't mind if they don't see me for a couple of years. When a partner gives you a message like that, they're holding up the promise of a big payday so they can get you to *really* start working day and night."

The wine bottle was still sitting on the table. He waited for fifteen minutes for an answer, eyeing the bottle, wondering how Her Majesty would react if her loyal subject pushed open the door and threw her on the bed. Did women understand what they were looking at when they oohed and aahed over biceps and pecs? Male muscle mass might look like a display to Toni, but it all worked. Just like it always had.

He poured himself a cup of coffee and let it hit him—pulse, muscle tension, action pressure. Could he take a chance and try a fast Captain Clark intrusion with the ALT8? A wild three-minute quickie? Toni could go on for two or three hours once she started working.

Gloria had yakked about it for a week when she'd learned about the Captain. She'd still be yakking now. Toni would go berserk.

He stepped onto the ALT8 stage and opened the box that contained his equipment. In his own apartment he left the ALT6 sword and shield on the stage, in plain sight, with the helmet on top, like real armor waiting to be used. Toni had bought a wooden box that matched the furniture in her apartment, just so she wouldn't have to look at his outfit when he wasn't using it.

He had played multi-player games now and then, but he liked it better when it was just him against the system, alone in his own world. He barked his password as soon as the helmet settled on his head and there he was, his robots ranged around him, standing on an iron road, surrounded by yellow grasses that towered over his head, immersed in a random fast action scenario.

The thing that came charging down the road looked like an oversize rhinoceros with a mouth full of fangs and a pair of tentacles sprouting from its shoulders. Two of his robots took up positions on the side of the road with their mammoth pole axes raised above their heads.

He stepped off the road and his third robot yelled a warning. Two frogheads had leaped out of the grass armed with shields and pitchforks. The rhinoceros was a distraction, as he had assumed.

The system monitored his prowess and adjusted stand-alone scenarios to his skill level. Things that slithered out of the grass followed the frogheads. A pair of eight-foot goons crawled toward him and jumped up when a robot spotted the disturbance in the grass. A menagerie of charging monsters assailed him from both horizons if he tried to stand on the road and position himself so his adversaries would have to cross more open space when they came out of the grass.

Slash. Thrust. Block. Whirl. Drop to one knee. Rip the belly of the winged fury that sailed over your head as you dropped.

Take it off. Take it off.

There were no women in this scenario. The female voice pierced through the illusion like a rapier aimed directly at his stomach. One minute he was 100 percent immersed in the battle, blocking a war club on his left with his shield, slashing at an exposed wrist on his right. The next he was pivoting toward the voice, caught in the storm of emotions that could hit gamers when something jerked them out of the game world.

He pressed the OFF button on his shield. Toni was sprawled in her empress's chair. Clapping her hands. Grinning. Applauding the little boy's games.

He stepped toward her. The sword didn't have a real edge but it had weight. The electronics were built into a stiff, solid bar of high grade ceramics.

She stood up and started to hold out her arms. Then the look on her face changed.

She put up her hands—exposing her fingers and wrists. She backed up and he swayed the sword back and forth in front of his face. He stepped to the right and blocked the space between the game stage and the nearest wall—cutting off the only route that gave her a clear run for her bedroom door.

There were lots of things you could do with a solid shaft. You could bring it down on her collarbone. Whack her in the waist. Ram the end into her stomach. Crack her knee.

His phone buzzed. Another female voice cut through the confusion in his head.

"This is a high priority override. Please excuse any inconvenience it may cause you. Please call Dr. Shinwalai's office as soon as possible. We have some new information we should discuss with you. You may call at any time. Your call will be given the highest priority."

There was a point in the creative process Rafe called the "semi-suicidal" phase. You stared bleakly into the future, certain you had used up all the ideas you were ever going to have, seizing any distraction that offered you some relief from the dreariness, moping and fretting while your brain stubbornly refused to produce something useful. His latest client had won a silver medal in a regional biohacking tournament and he was supposed to cram a celebratory party into a claustrophobic, micro-sized living room. He had placed a detailed, full scale simulation on his stage and paced off seven steps of so-called length and five steps of width. He would have been acting like an overconfident boob if he had claimed he could use that room for a party celebrating an *Honorable Mention*.

He hopped on Clore's call as soon as his system announced it and she hit him with an emotional glow that was as disorienting, in his current state, as a flickering light in a pitch black room. She couldn't give Rafe all the details but she wanted him to know he had made a very good call when he had put a red flag on his search results. He would find a small gesture of appreciation in his bank account.

"Manija hopped on the situation as soon as she saw the stuff on Captain Clark," Clore said. "The Captain's activities shift Len's diagnosis a long way to the left when you add them to the results from his sims—enough that Manija could justify calling Gloria."

Rafe would have liked to know just how small the small gesture was, but that didn't seem to be the way these things were handled. He grinned his best on-demand smile and tried to match his employer's satisfaction with the scope of Len's problems.

"I didn't know if it was the right thing to do or not. From what you said about the fact that he hadn't mentioned Captain Clark in his interviews . . ."

"That was the clincher. I can't give you all the details, but the info we got from Gloria gave us plausible evidence of a real act of violence. It's even possible Len was on the verge of doing something catastrophic when he got our emergency call."

"It was that bad?"

"It could have been."

"So what's going to happen to Len now?"

Clore smiled. "You're still thinking about the client's welfare. You seem to have the instincts for this kind of work, Rafe. You shouldn't get overconfident. But we couldn't have pulled this off if you hadn't followed the right trails."

Rafe shrugged. "He was a case. It would be nice to know he's going to get something out of this."

"It's out of our hands right now. I can't give you all the details, but Manija says the special counselor sounds optimistic. He's one of the best special counselors we work with and he says Len knows he may have been on the verge of doing something serious when he got our call. That wouldn't have bothered him three months ago. The sim treatments got him to where he understands he has to make some changes before he does something that could have a permanent effect on his lifestyle. How's your creative work doing?"

The sudden change of subject caught Rafe off guard. He stared at her polite, inquiring smile and fell back on his standard answer. "The usual thing. Lots of time moping around wondering if your brain is going to produce something useful."

"I can imagine. Feel free to take some comp time if you think you can use it. Just let me know so I can see you're covered."

He surrounded himself with the living room simulation as soon as she switched off. He had been thinking he could move the dining room table against a wall and hang the silver medal behind the food and drinks. But that seemed obvious. The hacker had a small stand, with one of his plant designs, next to his flat screen. Put the medal there, more discreetly, propped against the plant, put on a video about the winning design, so the guests would see the trophy as they eyed the video. . . .

Keep it modest. Not overwhelming. Keep everything in scale with the achievement—silver, not gold. He could feel the ideas starting to flow. Ideas no one else would come up with. He was doing something unique. Something only he could do. ○

BIRTH OF AN ASTROPHYSICIST



Chasing equations
down an inclined plane
he fell into sidereal night.

The itch of uncountable
stars soon became
his joyous obsession.

—Bruce Boston

Michael Swanwick would like us to believe that he “arrived in Philadelphia, a runagate indentured servant in October 1723, munching on an enormous loaf of bread and looking rumpled and unkempt, much to the amusement of the beautiful young Marianne Porter, who saw the spectacle from her apartment.

Less than a year later, they were wed. He now divides his work between *Asimov's* and Dragonstairs Press, his wife's 'nanopress' imprint.” His diverting adventures of Post-Utopian con artists Darger & Surplus will be continued next year in *Chasing the Phoenix*, a novel chronicling the events leading to their accidentally conquering China. Greg Frost is the author of eight novels (including *Shadowbridge*, *Lord Tophet*, and *Fitcher's Brides*) and well over fifty short stories of the fantastic. Greg settled in Philadelphia in 1984 in the mistaken belief that he was one of the boys on the Malabar front. Although he soon left, he did not stray far. Over the years he has written various stories (and a “Dickian” novel, *The Pure Cold Light*) set in the city. He now serves as a Fiction Workshop Director at Swarthmore College, is one of the founding members of the Philadelphia Liars Club, and sits on the board of the Philadelphia Writers Conference—so perhaps he *was* in fact on the Malabar front all along. When these not necessarily reliable narrators turn their talent to creating a spell-binding collaboration, one should probably heed their advice and . . .

**LOCK UP YOUR
CHICKENS AND
DAUGHTERS—
H'ARD AND
ANDY ARE
COME TO TOWN!**

Michael Swanwick & Gregory Frost

It was a hot, blue-sky August day and little dust devils were playing in the street in front of the First National Bank of Nacogdoches when H'ard and Andy pulled into town. Their flivver was coughing and almost out of fuel when one of the new "visible" gas pumps rose up out of the shimmering pavement air ahead of them, topped by a glass tank to show off the golden quality of the gasoline, a big red star, and the word TEXACO.

"Now that is a fine sight," Andy commented. "A very fine sight indeed."

H'ard was slouched back in the seat with his hat down over his eyes. With one finger he pushed up the hat just far enough for him to take a squint, then pulled it down again. "Yup."

Pulling the car over to the curb in front of a sundries store, Andy said, "I'm going to get us some gas money. You want anything?"

"Pack of smokes. Chesterfields if they got 'em."

The screen door slammed shut behind Andy, jangling a little bell. Assuming a benevolent smile, he went to the counter, manned by a clerk who looked to be half as old as Methuselah, and said, "A good day to you, sir, and lordy but it is hot! I'd like to buy me some Chester—lord have mercy, are those Cravens? I ain't seen a pack of Craven 'A's since I was knee-high to a gopher, back in the Big Fog Country. You ever been out that way? Normally you don't see the sun one day out of seventeen hundred. When this drought first struck and dried up everything, the children ran and hid because they thought the sky was on fire. Folks got their first good look at how raggedy-ass their homes and farms was and it like to broke their hearts. Put some pressure on a lot of marriages, I'll tell you that. Knew a man had a vacation cottage a little west of town and when the daylight come flooding in, it just plumb wasn't there no more, nor the mountain neither. Turns out it was just a mass of cloud compacted down so dense that the county paved a road over it, sent out a surveyor, and started selling lots. I'll take that pack of Cravens, thank you, and here's a five dollar bill to pay you with."

As the clerk, a little dazed by this torrent of words, counted out four ones and six dimes, Andy went on talking: "Been traveling all my life and still got a stretch to go, all the way south to Beluthahatchie. Now there is a destination. It's a far piece, three station stops beyond Hell. The train that takes you there when you die passes on to West Hell, Ginny Gall, Beluthahatchie, and Diddy-wah-diddy. Good folks don't go to that last place, though. They's low-class people there. And West Hell's just a suburb of Hell, there ain't nothing doing there at all. Saturday night's as dead as Monday morning." He opened his wallet. "Tarnation! Look at all these ones. This thing is so fat I'm like to tilt over sideways when I sit down. Tell you what, old hoss, let me swap you ten singles for a sawbuck, if you'd be that kind."

They exchanged bills. Andy pocketed the ten and returned to his soliloquy: "Now, I'm not saying Ginny Gall is bad or nothing, but the barbeque there is second-rate and that's the plain and simple truth. All the quality folks of Hell go to Beluthahatchie for a big night out, and that includes the Head Fella his own self, so you know they don't cut no corners."

"Say," the clerk said sharply. "You're a dollar short. There's only nine ones here."

"Are there? Well, never mind, I'll give you one more and add a ten and you can just give me a twenty instead. That's right perfect, and I thank you muchly."

"Don't forget your cigarettes," the clerk said.

"Well?" H'ard asked when Andy returned to the car.

"Worked me the short-change, made us ten dollars."

"So where're my Chesterfields?"

"I got you some Cravens instead. Finest Virginia tobacco and a cork tip to boot."

H'ard opened the pack, knocked out a cigarette. Then he bit off the cork tip and spat it out the window. Lighting the ragged end, he muttered, "Hell of a note when a man can't even get a pack of Chesterfields."

"It's a free pack of smokes, what did you expect? Egg in your beer? You certainly do demand a lot from the world for someone who hails from Oklahoma." Andy went outside to crank the car. Then he got back and drove up to the gas pump.

The attendant was a hatchet-faced young man with a rash of pimples across his forehead. "Two dollars and sixty cents," he said when the tank was full. He accepted a five and added, "Exact change only."

"Well, but I don't have anything smaller. I just now traded away all my singles."

"Then you're plumb out of luck, I reckon." The young man made an insolent face and, tucking the bill in his shirt pocket, swaggered away.

"Well, don't that just take the cake?" Andy began. "Don't that just fry your shorts? Don't that—"

"Don't get mad," H'ard said. "Get even." He stared at the gas pump long and hard. Then he said, "Let's go."

The flivver pulled out of the gas station and headed down the road.

Behind them, goldfish swam happily in the glass tank of the pump.

The next town they came to was Paradise Lake. It was ten years overdue for a coat of paint, but at least Main Street was paved. There was a booth restaurant, a five-and-dime Woolworth's, a hotel that had seen better days, and a cluster of other buildings, all in an uneven line and every single one topped with a wooden façade to make them look taller and more prosperous. Those few people idly watching their passing—barefoot children, men in dungarees, women in dresses with faded splotches of color that once were flowers—could have been statues stuck in the dirt for all that most of them moved.

At the end of the row, a little separate from the rest, like the whiskey in-law at a family picnic, was an unpainted clapboard hardware store with the flaking words BAIT and CRAWLERS painted across the plate glass. There was a water pump out front with the handle chained and padlocked so nobody could use it on the sly.

"Stop here," H'ard said. "I got me a yen to go fishing."

The land beyond the shack sloped away to a dry and cracked expanse that, by testimony of a pair of tumbledown docks at its edge, had once upon a time been a lakebed. But all the open water for a hundred miles around had disappeared so long ago that there were children nowadays who'd bray like a donkey if told it used to flow out in the open with no one needing to pump it up from the aquifer. There was no telling how long ago it had dried up.

Three men lounged on a bench on the bait shop porch, and another atop a barrel, looking about as friendly as so many snapping turtles and as immovable as mules.

H'ard got out first and passed indoors without a word. Andy stayed outside. "Might I sit a spell?" he asked, and lowered himself onto the edge of the porch, his back to the men. Nobody spoke.

Five minutes later, H'ard emerged from the store, assembling the parts of a split bamboo fly rod with a cork grip. Andy recognized it for a Montague Rapidan, which was a high-end product for a cheap rod but low-end for an expensive one. Probably it was the best the place afforded. Trailing behind him were a skinny elderly gent with gray muttonchops and a bowler hat who must be the proprietor, and two indoors cronies of no distinguishing features, all talking and gesticulating at once.

"Don't see what the problem is," H'ard commented. "I said I was going to catch me a trout and that's just what I aim to do."

"Mister, there's no *water* in that lake!" the proprietor said.

"It's a poor fisherman who blames the lake," H'ard observed. "Izaak Walton said that. I'll bet you any amount of money you care to name that I pull out a two-pound trout on my first cast."

Andy stood up. "Now be reasonable, H'ard," he pleaded in the tone of a man who had seen this impractical scenario repeated many times. "There ain't no point in riling everybody up. Nobody's going to believe a word you say, anyway. It just stands to reason. These folks can't possibly believe you can pull a trout out of hard-baked mud. Why, that stuff's as hard as concrete!"

"Is your friend simple?" the barrel-sitter asked in a low voice.

"Not as such," Andy replied equally quietly. "But he caught a shell in Belleau Wood during the Great War, and it changed his outlook considerable. Ever since he survived that, he's been convinced he can do anything he puts his mind to."

The idlers exchanged looks and one of them cleared his throat. "Five dollars says you can't," he said decisively.

"You're on. Andy, hold this man's money."

"Oh, this is just ridiculous. These good people are going to line up to take your money away from you. Thank you, sir. They're going to dig out every fin and sawbuck they can find in their pockets to bet against you. You're going to end up betting every penny you have and then some. Two twenties? Well, I reckon we can cover that."

In no time, Andy was holding two fat wads of banknotes.

"I'm going to need some water, though," H'ard said.

"You intend to refill the lake?" The idlers were really hooting now, warming to the possibilities of this entertainment. Nothing this good had happened in Paradise Lake for a long while.

"A tin cup's worth will do."

The hardware store proprietor sent a crony to fetch a cup and solemnly unpadlocked the pump. Some vigorous elbow action later, H'ard strode out onto the dry lakebed, cup in hand. There, he poured the water with great care upon a shallow depression, creating a slick the size of a puddle, as reflective as a mirror and no deeper than a sheet of paper.

By now, in the mysterious manner that news got about in a small town, the number of bystanders had doubled.

H'ard stepped back a number of measured steps, his eye never leaving the slick. Then he took a fly caddy from his shirt pocket and unhooked his favorite lure, which, as Andy knew from long experience, was a Basilisk Hair Caddis. With unhurried care, he tied it to the tapered line. Then, after pumping his casting arm up and down a few times to limber it up, he took the bamboo rod in hand and drew out a loop of line. In one deceptively simple gesture, he made the back cast. The line flew out behind him and to one side. When it was as far back as it was going to go, he made the front cast.

The line floated gently through the air in an arc that was a pure pleasure to behold. The fly dropped down in the very center of the newly created slick spot.

Everybody held their breaths.

A trout exploded up out of the water, hook in mouth. It leaped high in the air, its tail swinging, and landed with a wet slap upon the dry lakebed.

"Sweet merciful Jesus," someone in the crowd moaned.

H'ard trotted over to the fish, picked it up by the line, cut its throat, and carried it back to the crowd standing on the shoreline. They parted as if beholding the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

Andy had, meanwhile, walked to the flivver and returned. "I'm ready to weigh," he said. He indicated a set of spring scales as if they'd been sitting in the dirt the whole time. The cash that he had been holding had already disappeared into his pockets.

H'ard hung the trout from the hook at the bottom of the scales, then turned away nonchalantly to disassemble his rod.

With a *screech*, the weight indicator lurched downward, stopping at two pounds even.

"I'll be go to hell," said the proprietor.

There was a moment of stunned silence, and then Andy laughed merrily.

"Well, I reckon we've all had our spot of fun," Andy said, digging out the money from his pockets. He started handing it back to its original owners. "But I cannot take your money on false pretenses. H'ard here is, as you might well guess from what you just saw, a half-breed water elemental on his mother's side. Water will simply do whatever he wants. A gift such as his comes along but once in a lifetime and even though he is a bit of a practical joker, which it goes without saying comes from his father's line, there is simply no way that we can take your money under false pretenses. Here you go, sir. Not that we could not use it—we have a big-ticket engagement in Albuquerque but that is a week away and gasoline prices are ruinous nowadays—but it would be flat-out wrong. No, sir, you only bet three dollars, I was most particular careful to take note of that."

A laugh of relief gusted through the crowd as banknotes were crinkled back into wallets and socks. H'ard, meanwhile, raised one eyebrow ever so slightly. To which Andy responded with an equally microscopic jerk of his head down the street, where a great bull of a man in a sheriff's uniform was leaning against a pole of the Woolworth's arcade, watching the scene intently.

H'ard gave the man only the slightest glance. Then he returned to seeing to his bamboo rod, the two halves of which seemed to twitch in his hand.

"You might as well have this," Andy said, unhooking the fish and handing it to the hardware store owner. "H'ard pure and simple loves to fish, but ain't neither of us can stand the taste."

All the way back to the flivver, the bamboo sticks rattled and shook in H'ard's hands.

After they had stopped by the hotel to book a room for the night, the two men went into the Hot Griddle Restaurant, which was almost without customers. On every empty table, the cups and plates were turned upside down. A less than chipper waitress, who looked like she was saving up to someday buy a decent meal for herself, took their dinner orders. Meat loaf with gravy and mashed potatoes, collards on the side, for Andy and chicken fried steak with succotash for H'ard.

"That was never a two-pound trout," Andy said when the dishes had been cleared away and they were waiting for their coffee. "That fish was a pound and a half, a pound and three-quarters tops. If we'd had to use anybody else's scales, we would have lost every dollar we had."

"Can't lose what you don't possess," H'ard replied philosophically.

At that moment, a slim girl with a tremendous mass of red hair and freckles to match slid into the booth alongside Andy, locked eyes with H'ard, and said, "I'm not wearing any underwear."

"Heaven help us," Andy said. "What kind of a way to begin a conversation is that? No how-dee-do, no 'Hi, my name is—,' no big sunny smile that declares as good as words that you hope we might all of us wind up as friends. No, just a bald declarative sentence that combines a complete ignorance of the social niceties with a distasteful disregard for the importance of personal hygiene. I don't know when I've ever felt half so offended this early on in an acquaintanceship."

H'ard grunted. "Let's start over." He extended a big hand across the table. "Name's H'ard. My friend's Andy. What's your name, sweetie?"

The girl took his hand and shook. "It's Jezebel."

"Oh, it is *not*," Andy said. "Nobody's going to believe decent Baptist folk gave their daughter any such ridiculous name as that. I don't believe it, H'ard here don't believe it, and I don't believe you're fool enough to believe for an instant that we believe it neither. Your real name is probably Susan or Ellie or Mildred or something sensible like that."

The girl turned as red as her freckles. "It's Lolly. And you ain't no gentleman for forcing me to admit to it."

"Pleasure to meet you, Lolly," H'ard said. "Now why don't you tell us just what it is you're up to, talking to two strangers on no pretense at all. Not that I object. But I *am* curious."

"I intend to get the hell out of this nothing-happening town."

"Ambition is admirable in a child," Andy said. "Only, exactly how is talking with us going to accomplish that?"

"Gonna hook up with you two. I'll let you pop my cherry in return."

"What in the name of God's little green apples are you talking about, girl? Your lips are moving but listen hard as I might, I don't hear a single syllable of sense coming out from between them."

Lolly scowled. "I don't see what's so difficult to understand. Y'all got a car and I overheard my father saying that you're obviously criminals of some sort or other. We can come to terms. I've got a few heavy petting sessions under my belt and I'm ready to move on to unfettered moral depravity."

"Heaven help us," Andy moaned. "Could this situation get any worse?"

H'ard, who had been listening intensely, said, "Tell me something, little darlin'. What exactly does your daddy do for a living?"

"He's the sheriff."

"Heaven help us!"

"So I reckon you got to cut me in on whatever you got going on here, and promise to take me away with you when you go. Or else I'll tell my father you done to my fair young body what any sensible men *would* have agreed to do just now."

H'ard's eyes shifted away from her and his craggy face sprouted a ghost of a smile. "Well," he said, "no time like the present."

Lolly's head spun around so fast her hair hit Andy in the face. By the time her father was all the way through the door, she'd ducked into the kitchen and fled out the back way.

"Evening," the lawman said. He was everybody's caricature of a big-bellied, squinty-eyed, snapper-jawed small town bully of a sheriff, but that didn't make him any the less dangerous. "Just came by to caution you boys not to leave town anytime soon."

"My apologies, sir, but who might you be?" Andy asked politely.

"Samuel Cooke. Sheriff Cooke to you boys."

Andy introduced the two of them, using last names he was almost certain had no criminal records attached to them (H'ard nodded so slightly it might be mistaken for a man catching himself from nodding off), then said, "Would it be forward of me to ask you why we're to stay in this fine metropolis of yours?"

"You boys look questionable to me. I wouldn't be surprised if that vehicle of yours is stolen. Gonna telegraph the state your particulars and license number, see if maybe you are of interest to anybody."

"Well, I don't mean to be negative, sir, but I've got to tell you: I just simply do not believe in the telegraph, and that's a fact. New-fangled nonsense device like that is prone to breaking down exactly when you need it most. Why, wires get broke and then all the electricity goes astray and flies helter-skelter all over the place, frightening

horses and inconveniencing honest citizens. Fella writes down a two-dollar message and a puff of wind blows the paper right out the window. In all the confusion nobody even remembers who sent the darn thing or what it said. No, sir, put not your trust in machines. One man, one mule, and a leather sack of paper envelopes with a magenta two-cent George Washington stamp and a hand-cancellation on the front does the job best, is what I say. Takes a little longer but a dozen times more sure."

"If you want our particulars," H'ard said, "just ask."

"All right, I will." Sheriff Cooke folded his arms and waited.

"I, sir, am an adjunct professor in metaphysical studies, currently on sabbatical from Frostburg State College of Thaumaturgy, situated at the head of the beautiful Georges Creek Valley in the great state of—"

The sheriff snorted like a bull. "Stop. I never yet met a college professor that talked anything like you do. As for your friend—I know what you told those gullible souls down by the lake, and I'm going to let you boys in on a little secret: I come from a long line of witch-finders, and I got me a touch of the third eye." Addressing H'ard directly, he said, "Half-breed elemental, my maiden aunt's foot! You are nothing but a common fish wizard."

"No crime in that," H'ard said.

"Whether you doubt our credentials or not, it is a plain and simple fact, sir, that we do have business elsewhere. In Albuquerque, to be precise, where the city fathers have contracted us to meliorate a certain unfortunate natural . . ." Andy's voice trailed off, for the sheriff's ugly mug had just split in a big, mean grin.

"Now it all makes sense," Sam Cooke said. He placed his hands on the table and, leaning forward, said in a low voice, "You boys are intending to run the Dust Giant scam, aren't you?"

"What? No!" Andy cried in alarm. "I don't even know what you're talking about, officer!"

"Well, I'll tell you what. I am going to *let* you run your little graft. In fact, I'm going to help you do it. In return for which, I ask only for half the proceeds and your immediate departure afterward."

"I see three people here," H'ard observed. "One-third would be fairer."

"Half," Sheriff Cooke said, pulling away from the table. "I'll provide you with the dynamite at no additional charge. Oh, and since we're partners now—" he picked up the check and tore it in two—"your meal's on me." Over by the cash register, the waitress looked daggers into his back, but said not a word.

On the way out, the sheriff paused and added, "By the way. If you see my daughter again, tell her she gets the strap tonight for consorting with strangers."

The next day, H'ard and Andy were the talk of the countryside. Their returning the money lost on a sucker's bet was a magnanimous gesture that particularly impressed those who privately doubted that they themselves would have done as much under similar circumstances. Furthermore, the revelation of the exceptional nature of H'ard's purported powers was bolstered by rumors that Sheriff Cooke had judiciously planted here and there about town. The upshot of which was that in no time at all, it was a known fact throughout Paradise County first, that the two strangers had the ability to break the drought. Second, that this miraculous talent they perversely intended to squander upon Albuquerque, an out-of-state city with no known positive qualities whatsoever. And third, that something should be done about this lamentable situation.

After feverish consultation, a committee of the town's civic leaders was deputed to call upon H'ard and Andy. They arrived at the Terminal Hotel (so named because it was located at the end of an interurban spur of the Atchison, Topeka, and El Dorado

Railway) in three separate automobiles, scattering dust devils before them, one of which paused to flip them the finger before spinning away, giggling, to join its compeers. There they found the two men, with a maximum of fuss and delay, loading luggage into their flivver.

"Sirs," said the eldest, grayest, most dignified, and by testimony of his collar, only ordained member of the three, "a word with you, if you please."

Andy straightened from the trunk, smiling. "Well, Reverend, my associate and I were just on the verge of setting out to put eighty or perhaps a hundred miles of our journey behind us before nightfall, which I know you will agree is an ambitious undertaking, requiring not only determination and grit but all the free time we can give it. However, being genial souls and courteous to a fault, I can see no reason why H'ard and I should fail to give you and your friends a fair hearing."

"Sure," H'ard agreed.

At this they all ambled into the nearby hotel bar. There, the city fathers introduced themselves as the Reverend Aldis Singletary; Hiram Aloysius Bergstralh, mayor; and F. W. Showalter, undertaker. Sliding behind the bar, Reverend Singletary poured them all a schooner of beer apiece, to establish an amiable tone.

"Sirs, I will get right to the point," Mayor Bergstralh said, when all had wet their whistles. "Word is that you have the power to break the drought that has been oppressing our city, our county, and indeed our beloved state for the past six years. Is this true?"

"Only the Almighty has the power to compel nature to do His bidding, as I am certain the Reverend here will assure you is good, solid Christian doctrine. In normal times, H'ard and I could no more order the heavens to split open and bestow life-giving rain upon your dry fields and empty reservoirs than flap our arms and fly away. Howsoever, not all weather is natural. This drought, for one, surely nobody could mistake it for the work of Divine Providence. No, sirs, what you have here is the doings of a Dust Giant that has settled down into the land itself, and made this county its home. We could not help but note how the cups and glasses in your fine restaurant were inverted. You have already encountered it and have no notion when it will next decide to bury your houses, silt up your doorways, sift in through your every crack and window seam. Such creatures are inhospitable to water and so, by their very presence, they drive it away. Hence, your drought."

"Stands to reason," H'ard amplified.

"But the drought extends across seven states," Rev. Singletary objected. "How could one creature—even one exhibiting the strongest supernatural power—cause all that?"

"The drought extends across seven states *now*," Andy explained. "But if you cast back your memory, you'll find that it started in one region, and spread outward, bit by bit, county by county. Exactly as if—and it is my conviction that this is precisely how it chanced to occur—a female Dust Giant had a litter, and her cubs proceeded to spread out, each one finding a welcoming environment and settling into it as they come of age."

"Nevertheless," H'ard said.

"Nevertheless, all this is of merely theoretical interest, gentlemen, compelling to an academic such as myself, less so to others. In practical terms, using H'ard's tremendous inborn powers over water and my own deep reading into such forbidden tomes as the *Livre d'Eibon*, *The Mysteries of the Worm*, *Al Azif* (a negligible work, to be honest, its reputation notwithstanding), the *Pnakotic Manuscripts*, the *Unpronounceable Cults* of . . . well, they're unpronounceable. Not to bore you, gentlemen, but the solution to your problem proves to be laughably simple: an exorcism. Now, I am sure that you have tried that already. What sensible man would not? Even if it

wasn't exactly sanctioned by his bishop, he'd . . . I see you blushing, Reverend. But the truth of it is that just as the angels in heaven are organized by rank into Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones, Dominions, and so on down the line, so too do the chaotic powers have their own hierarchy of Fate Demons, Elementals, Gobelines, Incubi and Succubi, Drudes, Cambions, et cetera. A Dust Giant, I am very sorry to have to inform you, is a full-fledged Gobeline, and there are not many human beings who have the inborn fortitude to stand before one without dying instantaneously, usually through spontaneous desiccation."

"But I can," H'ard said.

"H'ard is that rare natural exception. Which, gentlemen, and I do apologize if I have gone on rather long here, is why we are urgently required in Albuquerque."

The mayor cleared his throat. "It just may be that we are interested in contracting your services."

"Sirs, I don't know if you are aware of how much money a full-scale exorcism would entail. Now, I know what you're going to say, that casting out the Dust Demon would pay for itself many times over in the first year alone. And of course you could amortize some of the cost by selling tickets to what is, admittedly, a crowd-pleaser of a spectacle. Heck, some of you might even turn a profit by providing concessions selling wiener sandwiches, ginger beer, helium balloons, and other such gimcrackery. But we cannot in all good conscience charge you less than an exorbitant fee for our services, when the fine city of Albuquerque, withering under the curse of their own demon, is waiting for us to bring them relief. Further, I am here to tell you that exorcising a Dust Giant is not like casting out a garden variety demon or nameless horror, which task could be safely left to the Reverend here, no. It takes a lot out of a man. When H'ard is done with his work, I will have to immediately whisk him off to a sanitarium, where he will lie abed, weak and helpless for months, living on gruel and weak tea like a dry Methodist, and dreaming of the day when he can rear up and tear into a watercress sandwich."

"It ain't no fun, I'll tell you that," H'ard said.

"So you see, I flat-out don't think you can afford us. I say that as a friend and someone who genuinely cares for your wellbeing."

Mayor Bergstrahl looked like a man who had just bit into a sausage sandwich and found a dead mouse. "Exactly how much would it cost to buy your services out from under Albuquerque?"

Andy named a figure.

"Plus expenses," H'ard added.

"Expenses?" F.A. Showalter, the undertaker, who had been silent up until now, said. "What kind of expenses?"

"Well, first of all," H'ard said, "we're going to need bleachers."

Three days later, H'ard and Andy were standing before the half-built bleachers when Lolly, sullen as usual, appeared to say, "Got another message for y'all from my sorry excuse for a father. He says to tell you the dynamite and such are in the boot of your car."

"The boot? Surely you must mean in the trunk. What in heaven's name is a well-brought-up Southern girl like yourself doing using a nonsensical Brit word like that? Next thing you know, you'll be getting knackered and gobsmacked and eating bangers and mash or toad-in-the-hole and for all I know parping on the hooter and where will civilization be then, I want to know? The question as good as answers itself."

"Where'd you pick up that word, sweetie?" H'ard asked.

Looking down at the ground, Lolly mumbled, "From a book."

"That's good. Read all the books you can and someday you'll be as smart as Andy."

"I don't *want* to be smart!" Lolly said in a fury. "I want to get the hell out of town. And be deflowered. And lead a life of wealth, adventure, and debauchery." She began to sob.

Both men watched her with interest.

"Not bad," H'ard said eventually. "But it needs work."

"The lack of actual tears gives you away," Andy explained. "It's them little details you got to watch. That's why experienced ladies always dab at their eyes with a delicate lace hankie when they cry. Sometimes they might spit on it on the sly, so as to smear their mascara. Not that a young lady your age should be wearing mascara. But the day is coming."

"Lolly, darlin', have you considered that your life would be a whole lot easier if you weren't all the time fighting with your daddy?" H'ard said.

"You mean being a goody-goody simpering little girlie-girl like he wants? You try doing that yourself sometime, if you think it's such a smart idea."

The two men looked at one another. "You fill her in on the theory, P'fessor," H'ard said. "I'll get her started on the application."

Adopting his gentlest, kindest tone, Andy said, "Listen to me, child. It is a sad but incontrovertible fact that we live in a patriarchal society. Legally, women are treated as being little better than chattel. Your gender is in fact a subject population, bullied and ruled over by outside conquerors, which class of oppressors we may call, for lack of a better term, 'men.' Now, traditionally, the powerless have had only one weapon available to them, and that is deceit. All slaves, from the time of the Old Testament through the ancient Greeks and Romans to the unfortunate years before the War Between the States, have acquired a reputation for having a slippery way with the facts, this being the only sensible response to their situation. What H'ard is telling you is to *lie* to your father. It's the simplest act in the world, it costs not a penny, and there's nothing like it for easing a man's—or woman's—woeful journey through the Valley of the Shadow of Death. I recommend it without compunction. In fact, I am ashamed of your mama for not telling you all this a long time ago."

"My mother died when I was a baby."

"Oh," Andy said. He started to say something more, but then clamped his mouth shut again.

H'ard took over the conversation. "Tell your daddy we got his message. Then tell him you want to go shopping for the kind of dresses you hate. Men have got no idea how much women's clothes cost. Easiest thing in the world to doctor the receipts and pocket a dollar or three." He glanced over to Andy. "We'd best see to the banners now. Saturday's coming down on us fast."

They left Lolly behind, her eyes wide with surmise.

By Friday night, all the dried lakefront accessible from the roadway had been fenced off, the concession stands had been built and decorated with bunting, the bleachers were ready, the tickets and souvenir programs had been printed, and an ostentatiously reluctant Sheriff Cooke had been coaxed into holding H'ard and Andy's fee ready to be paid out to them at the successful conclusion of the exorcism. People from towns around had flocked to Paradise Lake and bought up every available room and set up tents at the edge of town, in order to be early in line for the best seats. Further, a banquet was held in the Terminal Hotel ballroom in honor of the drought-breakers, it being established that immediately after tomorrow's ceremony, H'ard would have to be whisked away to a sanitarium to recover from the ordeal.

After giving and receiving many speeches—H'ard's "Much obliged and I thank you," being by far the shortest—the two men excused themselves early, pleading weariness and a hard day ahead. To resounding cheers, they retired to their room

and then, after a judicious waiting period, slipped out the window and down the fire escape.

Arming themselves with a dark-lantern, a pickaxe, two shovels, and the demolition kit Sheriff Cooke had provided, they made their furtive way out onto the dry lakebed. The sky was moonless, cloudless, and thick with stars.

"Right here looks good to me. Insofar as I can see anything in this godless murk, which I purely cannot."

"Not there," H'ard said. He paced off at least a hundred steps more, leaving long behind them the spot where he'd pulled the trout. "Here."

"Why this is smack dab in the middle of the lakebed, where the mud is baked the hardest. It's going to be genuine, backbreaking field-hand labor digging here. Why on earth would you be making difficulties for us like this?"

"Dunno. Got me a feeling. Best you not describe our toil any further."

They set to work. A long, sweaty time later, the hole was done. Cautiously, they lowered the roped-together dynamite sticks and blasting cap into it, attached the detonator wire, and then covered it over again, gently patting the surface flat. Next, they reeled out the wire toward the far shore. From the bleachers, it would probably be unnoticeable. But just in case, they laid it out crooked and irregular, like one of the hundreds of cracks crisscrossing the dried mud. H'ard dribbled a little of the excess dirt from the excavation over the wire here and there, moistening it with water from a canteen he carried at his belt, for further verisimilitude. "There," he said when they reached the crumbling, dry-as-dust reeds directly opposite the bleachers. "If anybody can spot that, then good luck to 'em." He unspooled the last of the wire as he walked through the patch of reeds, disappearing from sight on the far side of them.

Out of nowhere, Lolly said, "What are you two up to?"

Andy shrieked and clutched his heart. "Land's sake! Don't you never sneak up on a man like that, girl! I like to had a coronary, which I imagine would have given you a good giggle at my expense, but which from my own admittedly biased perspective would not have been one bit funny at all. No, ma'am, it would not."

H'ard, who had excellent night vision, stepped out of the reeds and said, "I see you got on an unflattering dress."

"Right as rain, mister, and I like it too!"

"Just a frazz less perky and I believe you've got it."

"Well, hell," Lolly said. "There sure is a lot of nuance to being deceitful."

"Why, of course there is," Andy said. "That's why its practitioners are called confidence artists and not confidence businessmen or confidence housewives or confidence sewing machine repairmen or any such nonsense as that. You certainly don't know much about the world, girl."

"No, I don't. But I'm fixing to change that right now."

After a long, hard silence, Andy said, "That sounds ominous."

"I've been running my feet off carrying messages back and forth between y'all and my alleged father to the point where I reckon I know enough now to put the pair of you *and* him behind bars. I guess you know me well enough to know how much pleasure that would give me. But much as I'd like to stick it to that worthless, no-account sumbidge, I want to get out of this here town even more. So I'm entertaining suggestions. Boys?"

"Well, this is ingratitude put into human form and taught to sass her elders. Here you are, out past curfew, with money in your pocket and a brand-new ugly dress to boot, all thanks to us, and you're thinking of putting the squeeze on two men who were your only benefactors in your time of need. I—"

H'ard held up a hand. "Andy, stop. Lolly, we give in."

"You do?"

"We do?"

"We'll cut you in on the scam. We'll take you with us when we vamoose. You have my sworn word on that. Plus we're going to give you something any young lady your age would give her eyeteeth for."

"What's that?"

H'ard parted the reeds and turned the lantern on them. The narrow beam of light revealed a small plunger box in the shallow gully behind them. "Miss Lolly, we are going to let you blast a honking big hole in your hometown."

There was a moment of awed silence. Then the girl said, "Well, damn."

Saturday dawned hot and clear. Assorted vehicles began rolling into town by eight. People crowded into the Hot Griddle to watch H'ard and Andy eat their breakfasts as if beholding exotic zoological specimens transported from deepest, darkest Africa to be displayed in an unconvincing simulacrum of their natural habitat.

By eleven the heat was so fierce that the surface of the lakebed rippled like a mirage. The far-off reeds might have been cobras weaving in the air.

The ceremonies began at noon with a marching band and some shopworn-looking floats, resurrected from the local high school's Reunion Day parade, depicting various tableaux from the Bible or the Book of Thoth, which didn't exactly fit the day's theme, but had pretty girls waving from atop them, so everyone agreed that was all right.

Then there were speeches, of which H'ard's, "I thank you and much obliged," was easily the best received. Finally, however, the preliminaries were done. To enthusiastic cheering, Andy then drove the Model T, decked out with dyed turkey feathers and strings of faded pink paper Christmas bells, across the lakebed to the south shore. There, he and H'ard climbed out and strode purposefully back toward the lake's center.

Again, cheers rose up from the crowd, enfeebled by distance but growing as a sense took hold of the assembled that this was *really happening*, that somebody was *finally doing something* about the drought. From so far away the only person identifiable was Mayor Bergstrahl, who wore a straw boater.

Andy took his handkerchief and swiped at the back of his neck. "I declare, this must be the easiest money we have ever earned. It would be just like shooting ducks in a barrel if the aforementioned waterfowl had previously been duped into assembling the staves and bands of that barrel, jollified into hauling buckets of water until it was full, and then sweet-talked into diving headlong into it immediately after clipping their own flight feathers."

H'ard said nothing, just looked up at the naked sun.

The previous night Andy had explained to Lolly how the event would play out: "H'ard starts out right by the spot where we buried your daddy's whizz-bangers and then throws back his head and screams in a most astonishing fashion. After which he does his interpretation of the howling dervish dance, while flinging all sorts of colored powders into the air. While all this is going on, I unobtrusively retreat some distance away and then wait. H'ard will be whooping and hollering and carrying on in a manner that will look to be random but will end up right by where I'm standing, which is well away from the explosives.

"Suddenly, H'ard goes still. Not a twitch, not the least motion of any kind. This signifies that he is locked in spiritual combat with the Powers of Hell. I will then raise my arms to the heavens to call upon the Merciful and Almighty to deliver us from the clutches of Drought and Evil. When I do that, I want you to count to five and then push down that plunger. About half the lakebed will then fly up into the sky, looking very much like a Dust Giant being cast out of Paradise Lake. It will be a

terrifying sight and the cause of such confusion and chaos that we will easily be able to disappear into the clouds of dust. If we're quick enough, it will look like the demon gobbled us right down and they'll even put a wreath on our marker. Ordinarily, this is when we would leave. However, we must then collect our share of the proceeds from your father, who would be alarmed to see you in our company. So you will skedaddle to the bar in the Terminal Hotel, where we three will rendezvous after that chore is attended to. Thereupon, we will hightail it down the state road so fast and far that by sundown this town will be a distant memory and within a week you wouldn't be able to recall its name, even if you wanted to."

"Got that?" H'ard asked.

Lolly's eyes were bright. "Oh yes," she said giddily. "Yes, I will. Yes."

And that was exactly how it went, at first.

H'ard flung blue powder into the air and, shouting crazy made-up words, began to stomp and hop and dance in great looping circles. In a seeming frenzy, he spun and leaped, hair and face glittering with sweat and the blue powder that fell back upon him in the dead still air. There were several pouches at his belt. He dipped a hand into the one that contained red powder.

Abruptly, a wind out of the south, as hot as the blast from an open oven, buffeted Andy. He took his eyes off H'ard, put a hand across his brow, and squinted through the roiling heat. The distant horizon seemed to be rising slowly into the air.

A second gust of wind hit him, from the east this time. He looked back at H'ard.

H'ard had pulled off his shirt and thrown it into the air. Something gleamed in his right hand as he twirled. Horrified, Andy recognized it as his fish-gutting knife with the hooked blade. H'ard's eyes were completely white, rolled up in his head.

Andy reflexively started forward. But then H'ard swung the knife down once, twice, and an "X" of blood sluiced down his chest. Droplets rained onto the parched earth. Andy froze in his tracks. "What in heaven's name do you think you're doing, you damfool you?" he cried.

From the bleachers came a delayed collective "Ooooooh!"

The wind kicked harder, shoving Andy first one way, then another. A low but powerful rumble, like a highballing freight train coming down the tracks, shook the ground underfoot.

H'ard began chanting again, but the words were *words* this time. Ancient and strange though they were, they sounded familiar to Andy. He'd heard them or something very like them recited by a shaman from some Plains tribe—he could not recall which one exactly because he was distracted by H'ard's voice, grown louder and more resonant than any human's should properly be, and by the screams of the people in the bleachers as they leaped to their feet, pointed in terror at the clouds, ran off in all directions but toward the lake. A straw boater spun up erratically into the sky.

In the south the swelling horizon had become an onrushing wall of certain doom, billowing so high that soon it must inevitably blot out the sun.

H'ard dropped to one knee, stabbed the fishing knife into the ground again and again and again, then sprang up and returned to his whirling, knife held out at arm's length. Andy shrank away just in time to avoid its blade.

Involuntarily, almost as if he were merely a puppet and had no choice but to play his part, Andy flung out his arms. "Dear Lord," he prayed to the deity he had not believed in since the seventh grade, "please spare my half-witted friend from the consequences of whatever idiot notion he has taken into what passes in him for a brain. And if—"

Which was as far as he got before the gust front of the monstrous dust storm struck, turning the whole world orange.

Which was when the center of the lakebed exploded.

Which did not play out as expected.

Having dug down into that packed earth the night before, Andy knew that what the blast should have produced was just about anything but the geyser of water that shot up into the air as if it were trying to punch a hole in the sky. Nor was it natural that the moisture that rained down upon the lakebed, the bleachers, and the fleeing citizens of Paradise County was no heavier than the spray off a waterfall. The bulk of the water hung in the air, where it flowed itself into a shape recognizable as the form of a woman a hundred feet tall.

Andy's skin ran cold. His mouth went dry. He could think of not a word to say. Not one.

H'ard, meanwhile, continued stomping about in circles and slashing and stabbing his knife as though engaged in a life-and-death struggle against the thick dust now engulfing him. Where the giantess's feet touched the ground, water boiled up around them, spreading outward fast. In a quarter of an hour at most, by Andy's reckoning, a man standing where he was now would be completely underwater. It was time to leave. Yet he could only stare in awe as the titanic woman opened her arms wide, as if welcoming the dust storm into them. The air crackled around her and lightning sizzled within the onrushing cloud.

The bleachers were lost to sight now. The town might have been a myth. Andy could see nothing but H'ard before him, and H'ard was flagging, stumbling. He pitched forward and Andy caught him.

H'ard's head collapsed on Andy's shoulder. The knife fell to the ground.

At times of crisis, Andy found strength by talking. "H'ard," he said, "I did not at any moment imagine you would need to recuperate in a sanitarium for real, although to be fair I also did not at any moment anticipate that you would tap into the powers of the First Mother, which achievement would be of the greatest anthropological interest to me were it not for the fact that we are in danger of drowning if we don't get our butts in gear." A surge of water ran over the toes of his shoes. He stepped quickly back from it, dragging H'ard after him.

They had to get to the flivver. Assuming they could find it. Andy couldn't actually see the thing in all the dust.

H'ard coughed and drew himself upright. "First Mother?" he muttered. "Wuzzat?"

"Corn Woman," said Andy, "known to some as Selu, Yellow Woman, or Iyatiku, unless of course you're a Zuni, in which case there are eight of her—"

"We catch us any trout?" H'ard asked muzzily. He was barely able to walk at all, but he let Andy tug him away from the pursuing water. Their feet splashed in it now but they seemed to be keeping pace with its growth. H'ard's head turned back toward its source, then craned upward to behold the giant woman pulling the dust storm closer to herself, concentrating its stuff into something almost solid. "Huh."

Andy could see their automobile up ahead, if dimly, its tires yet untouched by the advancing waters. He began to hope that there might yet be a happy ending to this particular story.

"Corn Woman, you say."

"I expect it's Iyatiku, as she's known in particular to come from deep underground."

"Then who's the fella?"

Still pushing against the dust and the wind toward their destination, Andy risked one quick look back. The clear water of the giant woman's naked shape contrasted with the dark dust clouds she embraced. Nevertheless, they did seem to be consolidating into a male form. It was odd that the dust and the water did not repel each other. Opposites, he supposed, attracted. These two, at any rate, certainly seemed attracted to each other. In fact, they . . .

"Lord love a duck!" Andy cried. "Whatever are they doing? And right out in the open too!"

H'ard's energy was returning to him at an astonishing rate. He took the lead now, flinging open the flivver's door and shoving Andy behind the wheel. As he turned the crank to get the motor going, the two giants crashed down to the earth, clenched together—away from H'ard and Andy, fortunately—and began to roll around in passionate abandon, with no regard for the town beneath them. Andy heard the sound of buildings collapsing, of cars tumbling down a street as they were washed toward the lake.

"I surely hope Miss Lolly's not watching this disgraceful spectacle," Andy commented as he frantically put the car in gear. "It is far too educational by half."

"Say," H'ard said. "What happened to my shirt?"

They were a good three miles down the road when H'ard said, "Uh oh."

"Uh oh? What do you mean by that? Uh oh indeed. That phrase tells me something is wrong, but I'll be dogged, flogged, and tied up like a hog if I have the faintest idea what. I swear, sometimes you are taciturn to the point of being one degree off comatose. If there is a less communicative man on the face of this sweet planet, I have not had the honor—"

"Police car."

Andy looked in the mirror. Sheriff Cooke was just visible through the dust-streaked windshield of his prowler, face red and hands clenched on the wheel. He was a fair piece down the road, but gaining on them rapidly.

"I cannot say that I am favorably impressed that the sheriff would take the time to pursue a personal grudge in the middle of the supernatural destruction of a town that it is his sworn duty to protect. To say nothing of the extremely short gestation period of such primal creatures, which means that within hours he will find himself dealing with an entire litter of—"

"Think you can outrace him?" H'ard asked.

"Oh, that thing can't catch us," Andy scoffed. "Anybody can tell just looking at it that it's a rattletrap that's fixing to fall apart at the slightest provocation. Any minute now, the radiator is going to explode, the hood is going to go flying off, and all four tires are going to burst at once. That thing is about to throw a rod and go right off the road and into a field where it'll sink to the axles so deep in the dust that they'll need a team of plow horses and a blacksmith to pull it out. It'll be a plain and simple miracle and one that makes men gawk in disbelief that Sheriff Cooke will climb out unhurt."

Behind them, a gout of white steam blew the hood off the police car while, simultaneously, all four tires disintegrated underneath it. Skewing wildly, it plowed into a cornfield, exploding the ancient stalks into powder.

A mass of flame-red hair surrounding an ungodly lot of freckles popped up over the back seat, causing Andy to shriek and swerve off the pavement.

"How'd you do that? How'd you make that happen to that fat old bastard's car?" Lolly demanded.

"What in the name of all that is righteous are you doing, alone and unchaperoned, in our vehicle, young lady?" The flivver bumped and jolted over fallow farmland. "I am scandalized just being in your presence."

Lolly turned to H'ard. "*You'll* answer my question, won't you?"

H'ard nodded. "Sure." He thought for a moment. "Andy's a scoffomancer." He thought for another moment. Then he shrugged. "That's about it."

"Lord God of Mercy," Andy said when he'd pulled the car back onto the road. "Whatever did I do to deserve this?"

"I took your advice about lying to my patriarchal oppressors," Lolly said. "So instead of waiting in the bar where you solemnly swore you'd meet me, I stowed away in the backseat."

"Right smart of you," H'ard said. "If duplicitous."

"Also," Lolly said, hauling a leather satchel up over the seat and dropping it between the two men, "I took advantage of the dust storm coming on to nab the money my daddy was supposed to share with y'all out of the boot of his police car."

H'ard picked up the satchel, looked inside, held it up for Andy to see. There was a great deal of money within.

"So the way I figure it—" Lolly began.

"Two things," H'ard said, before Lolly could say another word. "Ain't neither of us gonna touch you. Not today, not tomorrow, not ten years from now, not never. You can just put that thought right out of your head. Capiisce?"

Lolly folded her arms and pouted. "Well, damnation," she said. "What's the other thing?"

"You ever heard of the badger game? 'Cause I think you'd be right good at it."

"Heaven help us all," moaned Andy. ○

PAUL AND HIS SON

Joe M. McDermott

Joe M. McDermott is the author of six novels and two short story collections, including *Last Dragon, Never Knew Another*, *We Leave Together*, and, his latest book, *Straggletaggle*, a steampunk/dark fantasy variant of Cinderella. His latest near-future tale, which is about a father desperately trying to make a difference in his teenage son's life, is part of an unpublished novel.

My son is going to run away again. There is a picture of him embedded in my desk at work. He is smiling in a summer suit at seven or eight. He is fourteen now, and he hates us. He runs away. He spent three nights at a friend's apartment before we could convince the kid's parents that we don't abuse him, once. We had a chip implanted in him, and it will not make a difference. He will hack himself, disable the chip, again. He has implanted magnets in his fingers, to create an extra sense of electrical wiring. He wanted to install a computer in his head, ever since he realized my former paralegal, Yolanda, who was born blind, has eyes that are machines. Removing a chip under his skin is nothing to him. Maybe he thinks if he was more machine he would be more mature. I tell him machines only do what they're told. He never does.

My other two kids are fine, normal kids. Paul Jr. is the oldest, and the strangest. Julia and Michelle are perfectly normal. They are into theatre, music, and dance, and they got these toy glasses that they wear to let them see costumes people have designed inside the program. They spend hours designing electronic costumes. They trade designs with friends. Sometimes the girls run up to me out of nowhere and hold the glasses out and tell me to see them through the glasses. I see them. I see what they dream about, and it is wild, ornate, colorful, and beautiful. My son hides in his room. I have told him he is not allowed to put anything else in his body until he is eighteen, and I don't think he listens. My son runs away all the time. At least once every three months, we catch him trying to do it.

We lock him in his room at night. We talk to counselors, and they tell us it is a phase he will outgrow. His paranoia and rebelliousness is not neurochemical in origin, and his brain chemistry does not show any problems or deficiencies. For this reason, no one will prescribe any drugs to help him. He just needs time to adjust to his school, make friends, and settle down. That is what they say.

So nobody will prescribe anything, and that's not how it was when I was a kid and everyone had a prescription for something and it always helped. I don't know where I'd be without the Adderall until college.

Paul has, in his room, broken the walls and picked at the wires there, searching out new ways to plug himself into the machines of the building. He has gone to the emergency room three times since this started. He has seriously injured himself.

He saw Yolanda's eyes when she came to babysit him, and he talked about them for months. I don't blame Yolanda, but I do a little bit. I stopped asking her to babysit.

There used to be drugs for this. I wasn't running away like Paul Jr., but I couldn't focus on anything, and my dad took me to a counselor who diagnosed me regardless of my charts, and I got a drug and I focused and focused and got through high school, and came down from the drugs and by then I was in college, and almost through college, and I have had a successful life. Without them, where would I be?

One time when Paul ran away, the police picked him up near Riverside Park, sleeping under a tree. He had been mugged, beat-up a little, with bruises on his knuckles so we know he fought back. They called us and we didn't even know he was gone. We had locked him in his room, and he had rigged a switch to unlock the door from the inside out of spare parts. It was a brilliant gesture, but to what purpose? He was asleep in the night, out in the open air, where men beat him up and took his phone and jacket. The police checked my hands and chest for signs of violence, because they thought maybe I had done that to him and that's why he ran away, but I hadn't and there was no struggle at all, in me, and the DNA from under his fingernails didn't match mine. Some Canadians were arrested a few months ago, and the DNA popped in the system. Runaways, like my son, out sleeping in the park, fighting each other over a nice jacket and a decent phone.

I am a good father. I do not do horrible things. I make him clean his room, wash dishes, and keep an eye on his sisters sometimes. I don't even care if he makes good grades anymore as long as he is physically in a school. I do not hurt him. I do not ask for unreasonable things.

He runs away.

If I could just slip him some Adderall, he'd settle right down. Maybe he needs a girlfriend. I could hire someone to be his girlfriend for a while, put him on a good path. Fathers have bought hookers for their sons for forty thousand years. Something better than a hooker.

The drugs would be cheaper than buying him a girlfriend.

Noah, one of my clients, had filed suit against the medical council that had declared an end to his life extension treatments. His brain was going, they said, and more treatments would only drain his estate, and create a very healthy, very crazy person, drooling in a public bed somewhere. His brain had been going a long time, I thought, but it was really going now, they said, and he was fighting them and he kept me on retainer to fight for an extension. I had seen him in my office nearly every week, and I knew he was buying life extension meds illegally. I managed his accounts, and I watched the money disappear in elaborate, masked purchases, where someone was selling him life extension meds and masking the purchases with good software.

His son came to the city to settle the lawsuits and estate. He bought Noah a new phone, because Noah had been using stolen ones bought cheap off the street to make any calls. I put a bug on Noah Revy's new phone. I have detective bugs in my system, licensed through a private detective software firm. Lawyers always have these things. I want to know where Noah goes, what he does, and where the dealer's at.

I want to know this so I can buy my son the drugs he isn't prescribed. The doctors don't understand. They don't have to live with him, locking him in every night, always with one eye on him, because he is going to run away, and indifferent to his education, his future, his own family. Just give me the fucking pill that will fix this. And they won't.

When Noah Revy, who had access to black market medicine, was not in his apartment and not lingering at the library, he walked the streets alone. It's hard to picture the Noah who does that, once a wealthy government contractor and even now a tenacious suer of everyone in his century of life extension treatments, but wandering was what he did now. He rarely took the bus. He had such an expensive body that he could walk like an athlete late into the night.

He walked up my street to Broadway, and then farther east past Strawberry Fields, and down through the park toward midtown on the very first day he had the phone from his son, and I was watching over Noah's journey from my office. The next day, he walked up and down Morningside Park for three hours straight, almost in a circle. I plugged into public records and watched him make the rounds for a while, walking with a purpose, even though he was going nowhere. He looked like he had a place in mind. He had such a determined face, with shoulders square against the crowds in the street.

He was walking to his own death, burning off the energy from all the expensive drugs. He was restless, and walking off his fear, I guess. I saw him from the street cameras, slipping into a cafe for a cup of coffee to steady his trembling from the extensive neurological damage that rose up in between the MAO reinhabitators, and he was popping six colorful pills from an unlabeled bottle. All the pills were black market. He had stockpiled, but there was nowhere he could keep some of them for long. They were built to die within a week of creation to hinder the black market. If they were just placebos, his hands would have kept shaking, his legs would give out, and his whole nervous system would have failed him. There was nanotech in those pills, targeted to disperse in his throat, and climb into his spinal column. These were expensive pills, almost a million dollars each, and he swallowed six of them with hot coffee while out for a walk like they were breath mints and Tylenol. Goddamn, but who is the dealer?

There is no pattern to his pathways. I leave early. I take a slow ride in my car through the crowded streets to the preprogrammed places where there was a pause in his steps. Is the dealer at the library, where anyone can go and plug into the feeds of the world, access any data? It is the sort of place a dealer would be. Libraries are for the homeless, the grifters, and the people on the edge. They can surf the net off the streets undisturbed by the police until closing time. I went, holding my fear back from my face, strolling up and down the access carrels. On the upper floors books are preserved as artifacts in airtight rooms. There's a museum of books under glass. Down among the people, there are just terminals in rows like a factory floor with comfortable seats. People wash ashore, plug in, and push their consciousness out past the walls of the public building, chasing dreams in the crowd. I saw drug dealers there, in the alleys outside, but they were not the kind of drug dealer I needed. I wasn't after pleasure. I wanted my son to be like me when I was his age. I wanted him not to run away. I wanted him to stop cutting himself, and plugging into things that he wasn't supposed to plug into.

So, at home, at night, I'm reading in the dark, listening to the sounds of my wife laying my children down to sleep. There's a deadbolt in my son's door, because it is harder for him to hack something so big, heavy, and low-tech. It sounds like a hammer coming down. I spook in on him, from the cameras that are embedded into his machines. Every parent does it sometimes. We like to check. He's lying in bed, holding his hands up to fiddle with some program in his glasses. He's supposed to be going to sleep, but he's still got his glasses on. I couldn't tell him to stop without him knowing I was spooking in on him. He'd hear the bolt grinding, and he'd cover the glasses up before the light came on, and the pretense I would use to go in there would only make him suspicious if it wasn't good enough.

I flip off my machines when my wife comes in. She began to feign sleep beside me, but I knew she was only resting her eyes, yet.

"Do you think Paul Junior is actually trying to sleep?" I said.

"I don't even presume to know what he's thinking," she said.

"We can't give up on him. We will never give up on him. We have to just figure him out."

"I think we just have to keep him alive and in one piece for four more years, and then he's going to find his own way and there's nothing we can do. Four years, Paul. It'll happen so fast. Then, we have the girls and everything will be fine. He'll come back to us for help. He will. He'll come back to us because he doesn't know what he's doing. Then we will try to help him get right. We will help him pick up the pieces."

"He's so focused on such stupid shit, Carol, I mean, goddamnit, who in their right fucking mind . . ."

"Please, Paul, can we just drop it?"

I swiped away the legal briefs in the glass and pulled up the tracking software. The only building Noah ever really spent time in besides the library was his own apartment complex. The cafes were all random. He had gotten hot phones before. He had gotten so many hot phones. Where were they coming from? Maybe if I found the hot phones, I'd find the medicine cabinet.

I could just straight-up ask him about the phones and the drugs, right?

I could also go to jail and lose my license and the whole firm is fucked and the records of the call and the conversation could rise up in some goddamn algorithm sweep when the dealer gets wrapped in his own web of stupidity. No data lines. Not even a trace of one.

Is this really the only way to find one of these medical dealer assholes?

Goddamnit. I can't go around asking people for Adderall. I can't go around with my phone on me, looking to break the law. There are algorithms. I could get picked up years from now, and lose my license over bullshit.

In the morning, the first thing I did was spook in on my son, to make sure he was still in his room. It looked like he was there.

I unplugged, and went to switch the bolt on his room. One of the girls was in the hall still in her pajamas, rubbing her eyes.

"Good morning, sunshine!"

"Can I have toast and jam?"

"Your mom is making breakfast today. Go see what she's doing."

"I want toast and jam."

I knocked on my son's door. "School day, Paul Junior. Get up and get at it!"

He shouted something through the door. He was unlocked. He could come out whenever he wants. He stayed in and it felt like he did it to run away from us.

I found my tool box and got a screwdriver. I went back to his room. I got to work right away on removing the bolt entirely. He almost took me out when he opened the door.

"Oh, sorry, Dad," he said. "Adding another one, are you?"

"No," I said. "I'm taking this one out. It's stupid. This is a home. It's not a goddamn prison. I was talking to your mom last night. Look, when you're eighteen, it's not running away, it's what you're supposed to do. Wait four years, and you can run away all you want and do whatever you want to your body. Four years is nothing. Just stay in school, and don't cut yourself for a little while longer. Four years is a breath of air. Can you do that for us?"

"What the fuck, Dad? Can I just get out of bed? Can I just wake up and get some fucking breakfast before the riot? Fuck!"

"Don't curse in front of your sisters," I said. "Four years, Paul Junior. Four years to plot and scheme your big escape. Your grand, big plan. And we won't even try to stop you then. We'll even help you go. Can you wait just four short years, until you are eighteen?"

He looked at me with disgust. I disgusted him. I carried the deadbolt down to the kitchen and put it on the table where my wife could see.

She raised her eyebrows at me. I shrugged.

I flipped open my phone to see where Noah was right then, and he was somewhere in Queens. He was in a car in Queens, moving twenty miles an hour down the middle of the street, and what the hell is he doing way out there if not buying drugs?

I'm not going to Queens on a hunch, though.

At work, I had three meetings with clients, mostly legacy stuff about trust funds set up when my dad was still alive. It was easy stuff. My dad handed me lots of easy money, and all I had to do was not fuck it up. We wound the staff down and automated together before he retired. Anything extra I stumble upon is just gravy. The firm lives on. If my son runs away again, and gets hit by a meteor, the firm would live on. It is the machine my son wishes he could become. Automated accounting. Wills collated and sorted and trusts pulsing into the aether of the wires, a heartbeat of economic activity, taxes, reports, accounts, pulsing and pulsing to a quarterly beat.

There was nothing crazy digging over accounts, right? I could sit in my office and plug in without a word, and pour over Noah's accounts. Mine couldn't be the only bug in his cesspool of a financial network. There had to be something I could track. I had professional-quality detective kits in my system. I just had to point and wait.

I had a feeling for how much the pills cost. I plugged the system to look for purchases about that size, or larger.

While it ran, I listened to a woman who wanted a divorce. Her wife had cheated on her. I took notes aimlessly, and asked for permission to scope out assets with her legal key. She didn't have one set up. People hire lawyers and they don't give us what we need to win. It's amazing how crazy people can be.

With Yolanda let go for theft, I had to set up interviews with paralegals, too. No way I wanted to screen my own calls. I only talk to clients. I don't take in every crazy that wants to sue somebody over nothing. I mostly just work my dad's client list, and wait to hand this whole thing down to the complete automation that's coming. One man can already do almost everything with a few commercial software packages that thirty company men with law degrees or business degrees used to do. Soon, legal representation will be a piece of software that you download, like a game, or an accountant.

I don't push my kids to pursue law.

I just wanted them to focus, do well, and grow up prepared for the future that will be theirs.

The doctor and I have never spoken, but our work together was so important that we are like patrons to Noah. We both kept Noah alive as long as we could. I left a message with his automated system that I wanted to set up a face to face to discuss Noah Revy's legal situation. The doctor might know. They know many things, like I do.

He called me back late, and I was almost sleeping.

"This is Dr. Obasan speaking. Did you need to discuss a legal matter with me?"

"Yes, but not over the phone. Do you have time tomorrow for a meeting?"

"No. Speak to me here. I have a typographer running. It is recording our conversation. Legal matters, per my insurance policy, mean I must record everything."

"This isn't that kind of legal matter. I'll come by around eight A.M.?"

"No," he said.

"What?"

"No. You want to talk to me about a legal matter, we do it with a record. We do it now."

"What's a matter, Doc? Up to something with Noah I don't know about?"

"Mr . . ."

"Paul. Call me Paul."

"Paul, I'm sure you can understand that I would prefer to talk to a lawyer about legal matters with a recording device on a secure line, which I can give to my own lawyer."

"Listen, this isn't that kind of legal matter. Noah Revy is your patient, yes?"

"Of course, but . . ."

"Well, I'm his lawyer, and I'm trying to get out ahead of something that I would prefer not to discuss on a recorded line, or any phone line. It would imperil my client to have any public record. As his doctor, you are in a unique position. It will only take a few minutes. I just need a small amount of information from you, in person, with no record."

"No."

"I'll pay you for your time for a checkup."

"I'm going with no." He almost hung up, but I think he caught himself in the pause. "If you want a checkup, I'll do that. That's fine. I could always use a new patient."

I called his machine and plugged my calendar into his office calendar and came up with a time, a place, a redundant series of reminders. Someday a man will sell a wheelchair plugged into his calendar to carry him without concern from one thing on the calendar to another.

When the night comes, my son has already run away again.

"Again?" I said.

"Yes."

"Have you looked?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't call the police yet. I'll set the detectives after him."

The same software I was using on Noah was on my son's phone. If I thought it would work, I would microchip him again.

I drove through the streets, looking for his phone. Maybe it was spontaneous and he didn't bother to ditch his phone. Maybe he would figure out too late that he forgot to ditch his phone. One time his plan involved using his phone to meet up with someone, then ditching it. I got him before he could make his meetup. Maybe he just saw an open window, got angry about something and ran. I had my windows rolled down. It was late.

I was driving, and he was out somewhere, and we didn't know where.

He called. "Hey, Dad."

"Hey, where are you? Your mother's looking for you."

"I'm at Justin's building. I'm fine. His dad offered me fifty bucks to help him strip some copper. I lost track of time." He worked sometimes for Justin's dad in his auto-body shop.

"Okay, well, call your mother and let her know, okay?"

"Yeah, sure."

I drove past Justin's building, with the garage on the bottom floor. That was the place I was going. The sound of my son's voice was uncertain. I was uncertain he was there. The systems in his phone said he was there, but I wanted to see with my own eyes.

Noah's doctor called me from a hot phoneline, an unknown number that meant it was a hot phone.

"Can I help you?" I said.

"Can we meet for coffee?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

"Where do you want to meet?"

"I'm outside my office," he said. "Pick me up?"

"I'll be there right away."

I'm at the end of my rope. I drove past Justin's and I thought about knocking just to check. I saw no sign of habitation. The brownstone itself was quiet and dark. The protrusion from the wall where Justin's father's workshop was constructed out of recycled appliances was lit and there were banging noises.

"My son has probably run away from home," I said.

"What?"

"I'm going to swing by and get you. I'm not far."

"What's up with your son?"

"I don't know, Doc. I just don't know."

"So, regarding your client. Noah Revy is quite the character. You want to know . . . what?"

"I don't want to do anything that would harm my son. I want him to stop harming himself. When I was his age there was medication that helped me. You and I both know about Noah Revy."

"I see. Doping your kid won't work or a doctor would have done it already."

"I don't know how to get him to focus and stop acting like there's a big chip on his shoulder. Be careful what you say while we're on a phone line."

"I don't care about that. I've done nothing wrong. Have you taken your son to counseling?"

"We go every week."

"Well, they have drugs that can help if he needs them."

"They do. They say he does not need them. There is nothing neurologically wrong with my son. He just can't focus. He runs away for no reason. I don't know how to help him. These treatments they use do not work like the ones I had when I was his age."

"I'm right outside the office. I'll meet you there. I think I understand."

I drove over. He stood outside, looking up like he was looking for rain, but none was coming.

"Drive where I tell you," he said, slipping into the car. "Remember everything. Forget everything. I'm going to show you where I get a foreign soda that I like, from South America. Supply is very limited."

I nodded. I flipped off the dashboard computer. Strictly manual, now, with no network running, not even a safe mode in the background.

Passing on the street, I saw a bus with people in it. I recognized the bus. It ran near my own home. I looked for my son in the window as we passed. I saw my son.

He was there, in a window, with headphones on, staring into a screen. He was lost in his own little world. He was a person riding alone on a bus, and he didn't see me.

Wherever he goes, whatever he does, whatever thoughts are in his head, he is not me.

"Turn right," said the doctor. "We're going to Brooklyn."

"That far?"

"I'm glad you have a car. It's a bitch to take the bus with all my soda."

Past every building, every car, past the whole city glistening and shining in the sun, down where the rise and fall of neighborhoods has left a mark.

"I don't know where Noah goes, exactly, but I know a place where I sent him," he said. "The place is next to my office. I get the stuff here. Park in front of the Bombay Finest World Imports, if you can find a spot."

The decrepit storefront was both a restaurant and a grocery store for the neighborhood. The brown cloth tent over the door was ragged from rain and sun, but spelled out the name in large letters. There was parking right in front, and it wasn't

expensive. Fulton Street was not a boom town, not Times Square, not even South Queens. This was the wasteland of the city, where the burned out ruins of the damned fools that remained in their once noble neighborhood clung like locust husks on stoops and patios, and alleyways carried slouched shoulders in defeat to match the slouched and crumbling buildings. We are so like our homes, our environment. What few buildings remain tall seemed to be there because of parts stripped from the others, pasted on with gaudy graffiti that smeared over the crumbling places like a tired janitor's make-up. I felt no fear in daylight. The doctor was with me and unafraid.

"Come on," he said. "I'll introduce you to my contact."

Inside, the dust on the shelves was visible at eye level. A man sat behind a steel cage with his eyes half-closed and a flyswatter hanging from his wrist by a leather lash, his arms folded across his chest like a bouncer. He didn't look up at us.

The doctor looked up at the camera over the register and nodded. He led me into the back room past the bouncer where three young men sat at a table playing poker.

"No party drugs," said one. "We're strictly medicinal. If you want to party, fuck off. We save lives."

He sounded like he was the kind of man who carried a gun in his belt. He looked like he just got out of class at a college somewhere. He was probably a pharmacy drop-out.

"Adderall," I said. "That's all. For my kid."

The doctor said nothing. He crossed his arms and looked around the room at the many soda boxes. All foreign stuff, this soda, with Spanish words and Japanese words and a little Caribbean-French.

"He cool?" said the young man.

The doctor shrugged.

"Well, fuck, man, come get some fuckin' Adderall. College kids love it. Helps them focus. It's still legal over the counter in Honduras, and we get it there. Not cheap, though, and the import tax is a bitch. We sell three dozen pills at a time, no splitting up packages."

"I can afford it. How do you want to be paid?"

"You just bought a shit ton of fancy soda at this here corner store. Go to the register and check out. You will be handed a soda. The package will be delivered to your car. Make sure the kid can see your fucking soda can or he won't know you or which one is yours."

"Nothing new for me," said the doctor. "Same old shit."

"New price, though."

The doctor crossed his arms. "I might take my business elsewhere. Here I am, introducing you to a new client. I am such a good customer."

"Your guy distributes, too, though."

"I can find another supply. You know I can."

The two men looked at each other a moment, then the poker players snorted and nodded assent. That was it. I don't know who won.

At the register, I swiped my phone and received an illegible purple can of something that claimed fruit as an origin. It was a very, very expensive can of soda. Outside, at my car, we waited, holding our cans of soda. The doctor's can was pink, and looked like it was supposed to be lychee-related.

We stood outside and watched the sky.

"Think it might rain tonight?" he said.

I frowned. "I hope not." My son was probably out there somewhere, lost. My wife would have called if he got home in one piece. She would have let me know the moment he got home. I should call the police again. I should call my wife and tell her I

don't know where he is, but I saw him on a bus riding toward home. It's a sick feeling in my gut watching the clouds gather, and my son is out there and I don't know where he is and he is running away again, isn't he?

I couldn't find him where he said he was, but I saw him on a bus in the neighborhood. I texted her.

My wife texted back a single word. SHIT.

I pinged the detective software on his phone again, and he was moving. I watched the phone move. Maybe it was sold or stolen by now.

"Pop your trunk," said the doctor.

"What?"

"Pop the trunk."

I clicked the button. From around the side of the building, a man was pulling a dolly full of what looked like soda cans. He did not look us in the face. Young guy. Wiry arms. Tough kid ready to throw down. Cops come running, he'd bolt like a roadrunner, and get caught. He's jumpy. He knows what I know. I should give him my card, drum up some new business in a new field. I dreamed of criminal law when I was a kid. I dreamed of freeing innocent men. No innocence here.

He loaded up the cases of pink stuff.

"That's a lot of soda," I said.

"Yours is coming," said the doctor. "Thanks for the ride."

"Yeah," I said.

The young man didn't say anything. He went back into the building.

"You can close the trunk now. We can put yours in the back seat."

The young man came back with a cooler light enough for one hand. Practically a lunch box. He handed it to me.

In the car, the doctor waited until the door closed and the engine was on but I wasn't driving yet. "What the fuck are my patients supposed to do when the government quotas shut them down? What the fuck are dying people supposed to do?"

"Did you give Noah the drugs?"

"No, and yes. My hands are clean. I never give them the drugs. I have a guy who does it next door. I don't even sell it to them. You get it? I don't sell anything myself. I take no money in profit from it. I get reimbursed in rent for what I pay for the drugs by the guy next door, but it's never quite enough and he's always fudging it. I give and I give and I give until my patients die. I don't want to just let these people die in fear. So their mind is going, so what? Wait until it's gone to cut them off. They won't know. They won't suffer knowing."

"I get it, Doc," I said. "Look, I need to find my son. Can I drop you off?"

"Let's go get him. If he's running away every second counts. I'll check the dosage for you and see if I can help."

"Thanks."

"The pills are a mistake, though."

"So are yours. Everyone dies. If they don't think they're going to die, they won't do right by the ones they leave behind. That's what I do for them, in the end."

He didn't say anything.

My detective software was working. I downloaded a route to follow to go get him. Paul, Jr. was on an express train to Queens now, riding below the streets that have all slowly bent toward the recycle facilities and repurposed salt marshes on Rockaway Beach and there's surfing there, sometimes. I've heard people talk about surfing at high tide, and hurtling over the sea wall on boogie boards.

I don't know how I'm going to get him to take these pills I just bought. I can't get him to do anything. I will die, and my children will live on, but they will not be me.

"Come on, Dad. Get going. We'll find your boy. We'll get him home." ○

Liz Williams is a science fiction and fantasy writer living in Glastonbury, England, where she is co-director of a witchcraft supply business. Some of her novels include *The Ghost Sister* (Bantam Spectra), *Empire of Bones*, *The Poison Master*, *Nine Layers of Sky*, *Banner of Souls* (Bantam Spectra—US, Tor Macmillan—UK), and *Worldsoul* (Prime). The author's short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Asimov's*, and other magazines. Her story collections are *The Banquet of the Lords of Night* (Night Shade Press) and *A Glass of Shadow* (New Con Press). Liz is the secretary of the Milford SF Writers' Workshop, and she teaches creative writing and the history of Science Fiction as well. Her latest tale takes a look at the fanaticism necessary for participating in . . .

THE MARRIAGE OF THE SEA

Liz Williams

It's nearly time for the lamps to come on, and when they do the city and I will be wed. Dusk comes early in Simenna, the sky burning down to old rose over the white cones of the mountains, and the last of the sun flaring the canals into iridescence. I stand on the tower above the harbor, weighed down by my heavy robes, looking out over the shimmering sea.

Let me describe myself, as I stand here in the hour before my wedding. My family is old, coming from the founding mothers of the city. I have a classic face, white and curved like a crescent moon, my eyelids lacquered glittering black, my teeth stained a becoming crimson. I wear the dresses of previous brides, cut into layers once the salt has been leached out of them, layers of lace and stiff velvet, flaring outward like the skirts of a doll. My hands are encased in boned gloves, my gilded nails are sharp. I wear high wedge-heeled shoes, on which I can rock back and forth, and which increase my short stature by several inches. My black hair is coiled into a towering shell, studded with the scarlet sea lilies that make a bloody splash along the coast all summer.

Here are your lilies, they said when they dressed me, and they were my lilies, too, for was I not the sea's bride and her flowers to be mine? I raise a hand and touch

the waxy velvet of the flowers, as the surface of the water turns to a vivid pink and the lamps start to come out all along the harbor boulevard. Upon my index finger is a golden ring: my marriage band, and hers.

Meanwhile, the crowds are starting to gather. A string of moving lights wends its way along the hill roadway and I can see the banners of the Families flicker in the sea wind. My own emblem, the red bird of Simenna that sings only at dawn, is above me on the tower and it snaps and hisses as the wind rises. The air smells of flowers and salt, and the musty odor of my robes.

Before I climbed the steps, they asked me if I wanted a draught, before the wedding, but I declined. I would rather enter my marriage in full possession of my memories, and myself. This, I believe, makes it more of a gift, than to go unknowing. My family rejoiced when we knew I had been chosen, when I'd opened my hand to reveal the single red stone among the white, and we had taken pride of place at the last Feast of the Sea.

And now here I am, standing on the high tower, waiting for the tide to come in. I am alone, and prefer it to be so: I do not need the counsel of others. I have never seen a marriage of the sea, for the last one took place before my birth, but the diviners say that one is now needed, to restore the balance of the shoals far out on the sea roads, to bring back prosperity in this lean year. I know what is to happen, however. I have seen the recordings of the last marriage. The bride, like myself, stands on the summit of the tower, a tiny figure in her stiff robes (one less dress, for her). The crowds throng beneath, banner-bearing, celebrating with libations of red country wine into the plashing tide. Then, as the first racing waves roar up to the foot of the tower, the bride steps forward. Helpers follow her, unobtrusively, dressed in flame colored sheaths with their hair covered. Their veils catch the sea wind and stream behind them like fire as they assist the bride onto the steps that lead to the edge of the tower. And then, as the crowd holds its breath, the bride steps onto the final lip. She teeters for a moment and leaps, a falling doll. She makes no sound as she plummets and the splash is concealed by the thrash and wash of the waves. She does not emerge again and the crowd gives a great shout.

I have often thought, in the days since I first saw this recording, of her journey from that point. Did she feel as if she flew, hurtling downward, a seabird strike into the water? What was her voyage then, downward into blue then indigo light, hitting the weed-fringed black, weighed down by her heavy skirts? I thought of the sea coming for her, stepping lightly over the sandy bed, in her guise of the Water-maiden, sapphire hair caught in the wash of the tide and her eyes a glittering gold. She would have held out her hands to the bride and the bride would have taken them, tripping back along the causeway under the sea that leads to the Water-maiden's palace, carved of pale coral and starry with shells. And there, the servants of the sea would have carefully divested her of her gowns, peeling her like an onion until she stood only in her moonsilk shift, ready for the touch and the hands of the sea.

I do not think beyond that point, or of what must happen to the previous bride when a new one is called, for now I am the bride myself and this will happen to me. Turning my head, I look to the right and left, a last look at the city of Simenna before the helpers come. It is dark now and the lamps reveal the glowing gold of the palace roofs, the lights of the many cafés and little theaters, the singing stands where the poets express their loves and hates over the day. It is too dark now to see the nightingale parks, with their ornamental ponds and the stalls from which herb-flavored ices are dispensed, or the road that leads to my own quiet mansion behind its formal gates. I will not see it again, but I do not mind, for I am to be the bride of the sea. A deep pride surges in my breast and I look ahead once more, out to ocean.

Below, suddenly, there are sounds, voices. I didn't think it would be so soon, but the time must have flown by because I can hear shouts, and a strange sudden crash at the base of the tower. Then running footsteps and more cries—one of my helpers appears in the doorway, her flame veil fluttering.

"What are you doing?" she screams. "You can't come here—you—"

A woman in shift-armor seizes her by the arms. The armored woman has a long, pale face like a skull: her cheeks are scarred and marked with copper inlay. I get a glimpse of the armor changing, flame and stone, as my helper is dragged through the doorway and down the stairs. And then they come for me.

They seize me gently enough. They wear the same armor as the first woman: I know who they are, a mission tribe from the hills, following an oracular goddess. They smell of smoke and the white cattle that they ride. One of them says, "Don't be afraid. We're here to rescue you."

I am filled with alarm. "What? But I don't need rescuing. Don't you know who I am?"

"Yes." Her voice is rough and compassionate. "You are the bride of the sea. You are soon to go to your death. But that won't happen now; we'll save you."

"No!" I cry but the two women take hold of my arms. They pick me up bodily from the floor. I struggle and kick, but the heavy folds of the gowns tangle me up. I am carried toward the stairs and as we near the doorway, others rush in. Among them is my second helper. She carries a firelash; when she sees me, she whips it out. Its brightness sears my sight. It sears across the first woman's armor, scorching it with a deep black mark and they let me go. I fall to the floor. As the firelash whips out once more, I begin to crawl to the edge of the tower, my legs still tangled in the hems of the gowns.

"Stop!" I hear someone shout, but I don't know if they're talking to me or my assailants. I can hear the whip of the firelash and then an ear-stunning bolt of sound as someone else fires. A piece of stonework hurtles downward and shatters on the floor of the tower; I can smell burning leather. But I can also smell the sea. The tide must be racing up now, stirring weed and sand and I am almost at the edge. Behind me, someone screams. I grasp the lip of stone and haul myself up, someone lunges at me, I feel the lace tear, and then I am falling.

The air is freedom. It is salt and dark, clear of voices and conflict. I gasp it in during my seconds of flight and then I hit the water. The great cold punch of it almost knocks me out, but not quite. I can see the lamps of the harbor reflected in the water like swimming lights. Then I'm down, down and the water's hammering into my lungs and the gowns are dragging me into the dark . . . there's a huge thump, a kind of blast of water, and I think, "The sea is here. She's come, she's come for me." The tide picks me up in its fist and carries me away, sweeps me into its embrace and I'm breaking the surface, gasping, choking, sucking in air and life. I tumble like a bundle of rags, glimpsing the tower above me, then the long wall that reaches from it, but it's too high and I'm up and over, spun round and round. There's a flash above my head and then a blast of thunder: I think, confused, that a storm must be coming. Later, I learn that the mountain women set flash grenades, breached the harbor wall and let the sea run in.

I am carried through the streets. I don't feel afraid; I never have, since this began. I know that I am in the arms of the sea, borne by her, and as her bride, I cannot come to harm. I see the ornate woodwork of verandas smashed to matches, a woman snatched screaming from her balcony by a rippling wave like a great eel. But I bob on serenely, passing down dark streets and those that are illuminated by the lamps of the main canal, for we have at last reached the artery of Simenna. I am washed in state all the way down the canal and then—finally—the sea relinquishes her bride.

I am deposited on the steps of the great palace, a bundle of sea-soaked rags on old cold marble.

At last, somehow, they manage to open one of the subsidiary sluices on the other side of the city and divert the water. I learn this later, too. For the moment, I lie quietly on the marble steps, listening to the cries and shouts around me and the boom of the invading sea. I stay there for what seems like a long time, until one of the city's rescue squads finds me and carries me into the palace, which is functioning as a makeshift hospital. But I am perfectly all right, not even particularly bruised, as we discover when we strip the sodden gowns from my body and leave me standing pale and salt-stained. I am given another gown—a maid's shift in rough white linen. Clothed and remade, I reassure them as to my health and then I wander through the palace's mirrored halls, a ghost reflected in the ancient green glass. It is beginning to filter through to me that I should now be dead, and yet am not. I feel strangely calm about this: resigned, rather than relieved. I know, you see, that the sea's bride is to die, but I do believe that her spirit is greeted by the Watermaiden. I am not a fool, nor naïve as the mission women would have me. The golden ring is still upon my finger.

In the morning, the city is quiet and devastated. The waters have receded, leaving the palaces and mansions decked in deepwater weed, giving the city an air of ghastly festivity. Even the golden roofs are stained, and the pavements have been scoured with sand and dredged shingle. The death toll is in the hundreds: the Watermaiden will have many brides from which to choose, today. My mother and sisters were not among them: standing high enough in state on a balcony to have avoided the water. Around noon, they come and find me, poling down the main canal in mourning red, my mother sitting erect and horrified in the prow.

No one blames me. I expect them to, but they are considerate, speaking in hushed voices, continually asking if I am well, how I feel, whether I need anything? They treat me as if I am ill, but I am not. I do, however, blame myself. The questions circle me like wasps: did the Watermaiden allow the mission women to do as they did? Had she rejected me before the ceremony even began? Or were their actions all their own? These are the questions that no one seems to be asking, except me.

And there is only one way to find out.

A few days later, I stand on a rock at the headland near Simenna. It is night, and the lamps of the battered city float through the hazy air, wet with spray. It reminds me of my descent to the arms of the Watermaiden. I do not know what has happened to all the wedding gowns: I did not see them again. I pleaded faintness this afternoon and locked myself in my room, and when dusk fell I put on the maid's linen shift and climbed out of the window. I walked and walked, slipping through the back ways, following the network of small canals until I came out into the brackish land, and then to the cliffs. Then I climbed down the rocks, careful of falling, until I reached the long slab of stone that jutted out over the ocean.

The tide is coming in. I don't know if she will want me, but I have to find out. I do not know if the water will come up over the rock; if it does, then it will take me and I will know, unless she spits me out again onto the shore. But until then I sit, listening to the boom and hush of my bride as she batters the land, turning the golden ring round and round upon my finger, and waiting for her to come to me. ○

WHAT I INTEND

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us, “the absence of alien intelligence is a great conundrum, and nobody has the data to prove anything except that the aliens are not talking to our conscious selves.

‘What I Intend’ is wrapped around what might be our best data: The WOW signal from back in the seventies. For one brief moment, our sky was filled with a radio song that was both powerful and almost certainly not from around here. And why we don’t talk about the WOW every day of our lives . . . well, that’s another conundrum.”

Rich blonde hair and a serious voice helped the reporter win her job, and while she was certainly smart enough, she was also blessed by an absence of imagination and absolutely no political verve. Like most of CNBC’s staff, she believed that billionaires were royalty. Every day, the young woman happily offered up the expected questions, smiling and nodding with great sobriety while the wealthiest people delivered predictable answers. That morning her honored guest was T.T. Hynes. The two of them had been chatting about Internet commerce. At least that’s what she assumed the topic was. Hynes Networking owned certain indispensable software—robust platforms that shepherded every species of money. This very routine interview had been progressing normally. She asked about trends. That was a standard question. T.T. said that trends were good, which was perfectly normal. She inquired about growth. Growth was inevitable, he said. Then she inquired about the future. Could he share an insight or two? In response, he offered up several cryptic names wrapped in optimistic noise. She nodded, saying she was intrigued. But what did those names mean? Each was a ferocious algorithm, T.T. said. Then she laughed politely, asking, “And what is a ferocious algorithm?”

“Radical manipulations of code,” he said. “Code that accomplishes miracles when it comes to filtering and compressing oceans of data.”

The reporter nodded. Smiled. And she almost dropped a soothing “I see” into what she expected to be a moment of silence.

But T.T. Hynes kept talking. “These miracles are important. Because for me, it isn’t enough anymore, keeping everybody’s wealth happy.”

She nodded while he spoke, uncertain how to reply.

“I want to branch out in new directions,” he insisted. “And being human, I want quite a lot more than what I have already.”

At that mark, he paused.

“And what do you want?” she asked carefully.

This man ruled a multinational empire that helped protect nearly 40 percent of the world’s wealth. The natural assumption was that he would make a bid for another 10 or 20 percent of the pie.

Except that wasn’t his intention.

"A lot of possibilities have occurred to me," said T.T. "But what I want, and I mean more than anything, is to decipher extraterrestrial communications. You know. The signals and wild flashes arriving every day, falling from the farthest stars."

Later, studying her performance, the reporter hunted for evidence that her questions were responsible for the event. Because a routine interview had become the most important few minutes of her career. Offhand pronouncements from one famous man, delivered fifteen minutes before the Opening Bell, had triggered news stories and rumor storms. And not only did Hynes's stock suffer a partial collapse, but suddenly there were worldwide fears that a linchpin to everybody's economy was bat-shit nuts.

And yet.

By nature, reporters are self-absorbed creatures, quick to claim credit even when it wasn't theirs. Yet the credit wasn't hers. This was a routine job, nothing special from her end of the table. Indeed, a waitress or golden retriever could have handled the announcement with at least as much pleasure, charm, and reflexive interest.

Into the abrupt silence, she said, "Excuse me. Communications with what?"

"Extraterrestrials and the farthest stars," T.T. declared again. "And we'll look at the closer stars too. But the odds that the nearest dozen or hundred suns prove worthwhile is very, very slight."

"I see," she began, seeing nothing. Then her mouth hesitated. Her producer was muttering suggestions into her ear. Ignoring that unhelpful voice, she first worked to regain her poise, and once her shoulders were squared asked, "Are we talking about watching the skies? For aliens?"

"Of course other geek billionaires have attempted this work," said T.T. "Percival Lowell and Paul Allen, to name two."

She kept nodding.

"But I'm not going to end up like those failures," he declared.

"Oh," the interviewer said, trying to hide her considerable confusion.

Her guest offered a bland smile. Nothing more.

"Well," she managed. "Can you tell us how?"

"People always assume telescopes," said T.T. "But I don't care anything about telescopes."

Because she couldn't think of anything better, she used that good word once again. "Well," she said firmly.

Sounding proud, the man claimed, "I've never owned a telescope in my life. And I certainly won't pretend to understand the hardware. But I have my own set of tools, and I'm going to use what I know."

The interview was slotted to last for another two minutes, but the next break seemed like a very distant goal.

At a loss for words, the reporter offered a reflexive utterance proven in many complicated situations.

"Go on," she prodded.

"Data filtering," he said.

They were discussing the manipulation of data, back before this peculiar twist of topics.

"But not telescopes," she said.

"Frankly, they sound incredibly boring. Sitting in the dark, watching the dark."

The reporter nodded, throwing more reliable words into the empty audio. "This is rather unexpected."

"Because you're thinking about mirrors and dishes," he said.

"Dishes," she repeated, imagining shelves of stacked china.

"But I don't need hardware. Really, machinery would just be a distraction. We already have huge amounts of raw data. Data from NASA probes and every major

observatory. Those sources have generated images beyond count. Petabytes sitting in digital drawers, barely noticed. There's even richer ground inside the defense department, and the intelligence services too. And believe me, I won't exclude any nation's spying apparatus. Anything that offers me a peek, and I'll peek."

A quick breath was necessary.

Then once more, she said, "Go on."

"What I intend," said T.T.

Then he hesitated, showing a sneaky, clever-boy smile.

Sensing the end of this ordeal, the CNBC woman leaned forward. Engaged, hopeful, she asked, "What do you intend?"

T.T. laughed.

"What could be more obvious?" he asked.

"To help mankind," she presumed.

"That too," he said. "But first, I intend to make myself into the wealthiest person in history. That has to be the first priority. Otherwise this whole venture would be just a damned waste of a few hundred million dollars."

Then he broke into a mad little laugh.

Seeing her escape, the reporter said, "Well, Mr. Hynes. Thank you for coming to see us today, and for telling us about these extraordinary matters."

Yet that wasn't the right note to end on. Not in T.T.'s mind. So with a loud, stern voice, this middle-aged prince told the lowly reporter, "You don't understand. I know that. But I'll forgive you, my dear. When the time comes, when I'm holding the world in my great hand, I'll give you a gift. I'll give you something good."

"My great hand" was an inside joke.

A joke from a person who didn't normally use humor, or for that matter, rarely revealed any playfulness with his tongue.

But T.T. was a talented liar. Among the facts that he neglected to mention: The "Big Hand" was the code name for an existing group of engineers and cryptographers. Also, their funding was nowhere near hundreds of millions of dollars. And most critically, his alien hunt wasn't a new venture ready to launch. Not at all. His people had already spent eleven months and two marriages pursuing the Big Hand mission, already proving that miracles could be achieved with bright minds and a few million out of petty cash. And it didn't hurt that Hynes Networking had oceans of spare intellect ready to be borrowed from the company's AI farms.

The first astonishments had arrived early.

Eight months before the famous interview, the project manager was given half an hour alone with his boss and benefactor, and with that, the opportunity to trumpet about their various successes.

"We have fifteen probable Wows," the manager reported. "And judging by trends, we can possibly have another thousand Wows before the end of our first year."

T.T. absorbed the spectacular news, and then he calmly smiled.

Yes, he was an odd fellow. But frankly, the project manager worked with more peculiar creatures than this.

"Remind me," said the boss. "What is a Wow?"

Regardless of reputation and self-professed genius, T.T. Hynes wasn't especially gifted with technology. What he had was a rare knack for picking the right products and making inspired hires. What he could do better than most was offer the best words to the cameras, and it didn't hurt that he looked smarter than most geniuses, and, better still, that he carried himself with a winner's jaunty poise. But his hold on mathematics didn't extend into the rarified realm where Big Hand existed.

Yet the subordinate was startled, hearing the man ask about the Wow.

Perhaps that was T.T.'s intention. Maybe this was one of his quirky tests—idiocy worn as a useful disguise.

The moment demanded a patient, professorial voice.

That's what the project manager used.

"In Ohio, in 1977, a strong signal was observed," he explained. "The signal was at 1420 megahertz. Neutral hydrogen radiates at that frequency, and humans don't normally transmit there. Which is why it's always been considered ripe territory for SETI. Astronomers across the galaxy are going to know what the hydrogen line is, and they'll be watching. Except in this case, a primitive radio telescope was the only witness, and later, seeing the peak recorded on the graph paper, the astronomer labeled it the 'Wow.' Hence the name."

T.T. stared at a far wall.

"You let us pick our mission's name," said the manager. "'Big Hand' is a joke. Because the radio telescope that caught the Wow signal was named Big Ear."

"I remember that," the boss insisted.

The manager's enthusiasm was recovered easily enough. "Anyway, as I was telling you, sir: Our busy fingers have pulled out several new signals. Fifteen candidates sitting inside the forgotten data. Just as we guessed, they were unrecognized and unrespected. Because they were too brief. Because they were seen by commercial facilities or serious men doing entirely different work. Or because they were noticed, but the people in charge didn't appreciate what they were seeing."

The boss nodded amiably.

Was he going to make a comment? Apparently not.

"We have three 1420s. They come from different parts of the sky, but they roughly match the original Wow in strength and duration. Which would be amazing in itself. But even better, there's a laser beacon from just last year. So bright that a person could have seen that three-second flash with bare eyes."

"Well," said T.T. "That does sound promising."

The manager sifted that voice for information. Where was the excitement, the sense of promise and discovery?

The manager's passion was genuine. "This is just the beginning, sir. According to our models, we can assume finding a thousand of these events before the first year is finished. Most of the signals will be weak or brief, or both. But they are real. These new Wows have the proper motions, the right positions. They're organized in the sky, exactly where you would expect to find them, coming from the metal-rich regions of the Milky Way."

T.T. looked at his own thumbnail, asking, "And what do the signals tell us?"

"Tell us?"

"Can you see information? Codes, clues. The plans for starships, perhaps."

"So far, nothing. Not yet, sir."

"But there will be messages. Why else would the signals be sent?"

That ground had been covered three months ago, when T.T. first agreed to bankroll this team. "Sir, any signal we find, particularly those from more than a dozen light-years away, is going to be degraded. Space isn't empty. There's interference, dispersal effects. The lady might be fat, and she could even have an opera singer's voice, but we're sitting in the cheap seats, and what we are hearing is a mushy mess of notes."

"So," said the boss. "These Wows aren't valuable."

"Really," the manager thought, "we need to schedule more meetings."

Shaking his head, the project manager said, "No, they're priceless. These events prove that aliens are out there, aliens with superior technology, and they are actively transmitting in our general direction."

"But you told me . . ." T.T. hesitated, suddenly looking off into the distance, playing with a frown.

"I told you what, sir?"

"You and everybody else. Back when I was a boy and every day since. Experts have made the same promise. The universe is full of life. Some of that life has to be smarter than us. And even if it isn't smarter, much of it is going to be older and far more advanced than any of us."

"Yes. Of course."

"I didn't have any doubts about this."

"You shouldn't have doubts, sir."

"Why would I have thrown my money at this scheme, if I didn't believe?"

The project manager found a new tactic.

He shrugged, offering up his own silence.

Then the boss said, "Twelve months. I gave you that goal, and you gave me your assurances. But you have only nine months remaining, and proving what we already know isn't much help."

"Well . . . I'm sorry you feel that way . . ."

"Stop." The boss said it with his voice, and he said it with his hand. Three fingers touched the manager's mouth. Lavatory soap had left its distinctive odor and taste. But it was the simple touch that made the man flinch and back away.

An uncomfortable moment lingered.

Perhaps T.T. Hynes wasn't well regarded among those who understood mathematics. But he said something remarkable just then.

"I wasn't going to help you."

"What's that, sir?"

"I allowed you to build your equipment and your protocols. I was prepared to let you try your skills at this business. This fun. But I can't risk that great things will be discovered by others. We have to be the winners in this race."

"That's what I want too," said the manager.

"So I'm going to tell you something obvious. An insight that just might help you with your very important work."

"I'll listen to any suggestion, sir."

"They want to be understood," said the boss, once again applying the three-finger shut-up touch. "The dumbest shit of alien slime isn't going to spend that much energy and that much capital to make an empty three second flash of light."

No one knew her husband better. In fact, T.T.'s wife knew him well enough that she long ago gave up any pretense of deep understanding. This was the most opaque creature ever produced by humanity. Every person had schemes and dreams and a few great thoughts, but T.T.'s thoughts were always wrapped around winning. What mattered was every form of success. Money mattered, and so he built his corporation around that magical stuff. She was married to him because she was beautiful and smart. They had houses that the world envied, and they had lovely children because that's what the world expected. And T.T. could be a reasonable father, when necessary. But how much he loved his family was one of the many mysteries, to her, and perhaps to him too.

The CNBC debacle had just happened, and with a quiet, no-nonsense voice, the beautiful woman asked her very odd husband, "Are you screwing her?"

He knew who she was referring to. Guilty men would have feigned confusion and then straightened their backs, preparing to lie. While innocent men would have cultured the outrage in their voices.

T.T. was something else.

"Yes," he said with flat conviction. "That girl and I are sleeping together."

"Do you love her?"

"I love her body. And that voice. And her gorgeous blonde hair."

"Is that why you gave her your big news?"

T.T. hesitated, just for an instant. Then he suddenly laughed at her, shaking his head with what looked like disappointment. "That isn't true, darling. You know I don't sleep with anybody but you."

Years of experience and several private investigators agreed with that assessment: T.T. was profoundly monogamous. Most wives would have considered that quality to be a plus. Except the two of them didn't have sex often or with much vigor, and his absence of affairs long ago convinced her that this man was peculiarly uninspired by normal masculine feelings.

That didn't stop his wife from having her little adventures, and a couple of big ones too. In fact, her last child wasn't even T.T.'s.

If the man knew that or cared were other mysteries not worth investigating.

"So why did you announce your alien hunt now?" she asked.

"This was the smart time."

Three days after the unexpected announcement, the company stock had bottomed out. Hopefully. But there was still quite a lot of talk about removing T.T. from his CEO duties, and perhaps even loosening his grip on the board.

T.T. shrugged and said, "I have my reasons."

About that, she had no doubts.

"So when does the hunt begin?" she asked. Then because she was still fond of this man, and because she loved being Mrs. Hynes, she put a hand on her husband's shoulder and gripped his elbow with her other hand.

He said nothing, except for the half-smile.

And then she had it figured out.

"No, wait," she said. "You already have your people working on the project. Don't you?"

"For most of a year, yes."

"Hundreds of millions invested?"

"Oh, it's cost a fraction of that."

"And have you found any aliens?"

"I haven't found one," he said.

She grabbed the elbow again.

"Tim," she said quietly, firmly.

"But my people have. They've identified one thousand, one hundred and three probables. Plus ten thousand more flashes and blips that might or might not have been genuine."

That's when she saw his logic.

"You're close," she guessed.

"I said that we have thousands—"

"Close to getting something more." She was surprised by the news and surprised by her own delight. "I halfway understand you," she said.

"More than halfway," he said.

"This isn't charitable research. You want to make a profit. And you think what? That deciphering alien transmissions will give you new technologies?"

"Imagine that it does."

"I am imagining," she said.

"If there are wonders and if I find them, then I will be the most important person on this one world."

The words were calm, but his breathing seemed quick.

"That announcement," she said. "You wanted to sound crazy."

"Why would I want that?"

"Because you realized how easy this is. And you're afraid others are going to try it too. So you throw them off the trail. You pretend you're a madman chasing ETs, and your competitors don't want to be stigmatized in the same way."

"People care too much about public noise," he said.

"What happens next? You call a press conference and make your huge announcement?"

He nodded. "If they can finally tease out the messages, yes."

"They haven't? Why not?"

He shook his head, frowning when he said, "The data are too distorted, too simple. At least that's the way it's been explained to me."

"But what if they can't decipher anything?"

"But they assure me they're close."

"Are they're lying?"

"I would know," he remarked. "Don't I always know when someone is lying?"

T.T. had never asked about his wife's boyfriends. That was another blessing of being married to this rare kind of man.

Unless she was terribly wrong about him.

A sudden thought bubbled out of nowhere. The notion took her by surprise, and her response, instant and unwelcome, was a long rippling dose of laughter.

"What's so funny?" he asked.

She didn't want to say it, and she couldn't stop herself.

"I get it. You're an alien, aren't you?" Again, laughter. "Of course you are, Tim. That explains everything, everything."

Very rarely did this man become upset.

And never with her.

But he seemed genuinely enraged, and after a few moments of red-faced silence, he acted shaken.

"I'm not an alien," he said. "Why, darling, would you even think that?"

The physicist believed in quite a lot.

Belief was a terrible problem.

There were days when she was convinced of her own withering brilliance, and there were other days when she was just as certain that she was a bland, simple-thinking idiot. Confidence was a suit of armor, right up until the armor abandoned her for places unknown. Yes, and she was lovely, lovely, lovely. Unless she was ugly. Grotesque. Monstrous. Of course her mental health was a liability, and maybe she should mention her shifting moods to someone. But she was going to wait until she turned thirty or sixty, or a thousand. She certainly didn't confess to crazy thoughts yesterday. And she had no intention to do it now. Nor tomorrow, most likely. Because what this half-pretty, deeply original woman never doubted, not for an instant, was that her current job would take her to wonderful places.

Oh, yes. And like everybody else in Big Hand, she was certain that the galaxy was filled with beautiful, brilliant life.

Which was another big problem.

The great Mr. Hynes would visit almost every day during these last weeks. Usually his appearances lasted only for a few minutes. Usually he saw no one but the project manager and the lead cryptographer. T.T. never acted interested in faces, and he certainly never reacted to her face in any special way. Yet she felt a connection nonetheless. It was as if a radiant thread of potential was pushing its way back through time, from the golden future to the present moment, existing for no reason

except to encourage her, telling her that she needed to think a little harder and a lot better than she had already.

Well, that didn't sound crazy, did it?

The CNBC interview: That's why she was dancing with these vivid notions of romance with Timothy T. Hynes had always been Hynes, and even a crazy woman couldn't imagine herself with him. But after the interview, while most of the world was loudly proclaiming that the boss was insane . . . that's when she had the sudden premonition that the two of them were far more alike than she had ever imagined.

That's why she had to speak to him, for the first time.

But of course nobody else wanted that. There were barriers to what seemed so easy in theory. The daily appearance came without warnings. Their manager was their manager because he was exceptionally talented at monopolizing their benefactor's time and gaze. The top cryptographer had his own tricks. Sometimes he brought his people with him, and everybody talked the good talk about deriving meanings from a thousand-plus signals, and everybody talked about progress, even though these Wows had no interest in being deciphered.

In a more confident mood, she would have been decisive.

But this week wasn't that kind of week.

She sat at her desk, watching the sealed doorway. T.T. would arrive for a few minutes or longer than an hour, and from her station, she could see inside the conference room. She carefully studied how the various hands moved, how the faces changed. Not a word was audible behind panes of glass, but these polite events were still rich with knowledge, if you paid close attention to posture and faces and where the eyes pointed when the attached faces were lying.

She wasn't a bold person. Not by nature, no. Yet the stakes were so high that she ignored her own mood—a rarity in itself—and ten days after the disastrous CNBC interview, and three minutes after T.T. had finished the day's visit and walked out into the world . . . that's when the physicist put her many failings aside. Doubts were strangled and legs were forced to move, carrying her into the conference room. The manager was still there. All of the experts about language and alien biology were present. It had been a giant meeting, yet briefer than most, and everyone was shell shocked, looking through her with their first defeated glances.

"Have you told him the truth yet?" she began.

Nobody misinterpreted the question. They knew what she was asking.

But the manager preferred games. He shrugged. He said her name. Then with a tame little voice, he asked, "What are you talking about? What truth?"

"The signals don't hold any information," she said. "Tell him that."

The reaction was immediate. Every participant had reasons to shout at her, and even if they tried to be polite with their rage, it was rage nonetheless.

Yet every reflex comes to an end.

The room grew quiet again.

"We have a thousand strong signals," she continued. "And many more that we can't confirm. Sure. Sure, sure. But they don't offer anything sensible."

Nobody dared argue that point.

"What would make sense would be for two of these signals to emerge from the same point in the sky. Even once. What would make a lot of golden sense is if some portion of the signals or maybe all of the signals were associated with visible stars. Except none of them are. And what would be wonderfully helpful is for just one of these damned things to last longer than a few minutes, and if the transmission gave us any sign of being aimed at our visible sun."

Nothing she said was wrong.

They knew this.

But these were clever people, and cleverness always finds ways to convince itself that it was never mistaken.

Everybody glanced at the manager.

He felt the eyes, the expectations. Bowing to pressures, he said, "Mr. Hynes knows all about these issues. And he understands the situation, yes. The data don't resemble what we expected, and that's the nature of science. Lack of repetition is an artifact of life's abundance in the Universe. Not being associated with stars and worlds means nothing. It means that life always migrates into deep space. Who knows why? Maybe great minds like the cold. Maybe there's a lot more room and safety, keeping away from wild stars. And, yes these transmissions are brief, but that's because they come from distant places, and why would they aim at us? Even if they notice the Earth, it's an older version of our world, full of wilderness and radio dead."

A good manager nods with authority. That's what this man did. "You don't need to worry, my dear. Mr. Hynes is well briefed. He has no grounds for complaints. Though I'm sure our benefactor grows rather impatient with this business . . . as well he should . . ."

With that, he gave every subordinate an accusing stare.

People moved past her, escaping out the door.

Then it was just the two of them.

Looking at her, the manager sensed some piece of her thoughts. And maybe that's why he asked, "Do you want to meet with Mr. Hynes? I could arrange it."

He was talking about a planned, thoroughly controlled encounter.

"Next week perhaps," he said, remembering to smile.

She didn't like smiles, as a rule. Smiles were teeth and lips. Tigers and salesmen used teeth and lips as weapons.

"No, thank you," she said.

The manager nodded.

"I'm going back to my desk," she promised.

"Very good," he said. "And thank you for bringing your thoughts to me."

The walk back to her station proved long and horrible. Coworkers glanced at her, or they avoided her eyes. She kept thinking that she should have done instead of what she did . . . was what? What?

And that was when the first insight arrived.

That was the moment when she knew what she would do tomorrow. She would wait like a tiger in the shadows, waiting for her future husband to walk down to this watering hole.

And with that strategy set and ready, a second, far larger insight found her in a receptive mood.

She knew everything.

Without question, she suddenly understood the Universe.

Except it was a very difficult piece of knowledge. She had a sharp cold awful epiphany, knowledge acquired with little warning and no preparation, and now the central premise of this project was doomed to be crushed. The aliens would die, and only one goodness remained. These magnificent events, and she was in the midst of history, and in the end, wasn't that really the second best outcome of all?

As a boy, somewhere in second grade, Timothy Thomas Hynes concluded that he resembled nobody else. Other people were emotional, impulsive animals. Smart and stupid, it didn't matter which. He could see that at school and across the adult world, and the only difference was that very smart people wasted their gifts convincing themselves that they were right about whatever they cared about most.

Free of illusions, Timmy Hynes didn't have to pretend to himself. He could play the mastermind for others, manipulating opinions and actions. Or he was the idiot and got his way by other means. Adulthood found him secure with those few talents, including a singular capacity to look at the world with dry eyes, deciphering what truly mattered.

Wealth was what mattered.

That's why he joined his small inheritance to a group of imaginative mathematical minds, producing Hynes Networking.

Most of the world believed in imagination, considering it a considerable gift.

Thankfully, T.T. didn't suffer that distraction. Daydreams were minutes lost. Doodles and the great works of art were collections of lines only slightly more interesting than random nonsense. He hired thinkers because thinkers made him money when they weren't wasting time. But he didn't trust their kind. So he also hired people that were more like him, and he listened to their good advice and everything else too. And because there had to be an element of intuition in any decision—that critical spark missing from every machine—T.T. allowed his tiny bit of imagination to whisper only to him, advising him only in the largest decisions.

But living inside this man, bright and urgent, was one belief.

An imaginative flourish as old as any, almost certainly stemming from his first years of life.

The Universe was full of life.

Television told him that, and his parents agreed with those science programs, and the movies too. A well-loved grandfather once put a warm hand on the boy's little shoulder, and that fine deep voice, sounding like words drawn through leather, promised that Mars had microbes and the stars had other Earths, and most of the Universe was older than they were on this little blue world that held no great significance whatsoever.

For a creature without a dreamy nature, that single dream took hold deep and never left him alone. That was the spark for the Big Hand project. But to satisfy the rest of his nature, T.T. insisted on a business goal. His people would identify and translate the alien signals, and then he would carve up whatever he could use, re-making the world with the wonders that rained out of these insights.

One day he had a large Big Hand meeting that accomplished nothing. The next day, T.T. decided to drop by before lunch, catching the head cryptographer when his stomach was empty.

But nothing went as expected.

He passed through the EM baffles and the sealed door. T.T. was alone, which was normal enough. Relaxed and focused, he approached his target, and that's when he heard a low voice asking someone what they were doing, and an instant later, there was a blast that shook glass, and half of the room's inhabitants dropped flat on the floor.

T.T. remained upright, but only because he hadn't seen the woman tossing the fire-cracker in his direction.

The flash was barely noticed, but the blast's roar seemed to linger. He smelled smoke. The first kick of adrenaline made him stand taller. A smallish woman was approaching him, nearly running. He remembered her. In the Big Hand ranks, she was the hardest to assess. T.T. was notoriously poor with names, but he must have been told her name once at least. What she did . . . her purpose here . . . she was a physicist by training, but with a strong talent for art and programming. Another scientist had asked for her help with this work, and the manager had offered weak praise, and T.T. didn't fight the hiring but should have. Because she was the one who

had exploded the bomb. And she was truly running now, waving at him, shouting, "That's what they are, the Wows. Because that's all they can manage."

T.T. took a useless step backward.

She stopped just short of him, smiling in a wild fashion.

He should have been scared but wasn't. His voice was smooth and almost calm, asking her, "What do you mean? All who can manage?"

"The aliens," she said. "They can't make anything better than an empty flash of light, or radio. Whatever."

He started to ask the same question again. "What do you mean?"

"I mean this," she said, and she lifted her left hand, reaching for his chest.

But then the project manager took it upon himself to push the crazy woman to the floor, giving her a vivid rug burn before he was told to let her go.

"She has something to say," T.T. warned. "And I want to hear it."

The man needed help with the mathematics and everything else.

For three and a half hours, T.T. sat in the conference room with a variety of experts, but the manager did much of the talking. It seemed that this nameless crazy woman was neither nameless nor insane. But she wasn't at her best, not having slept for more than a day, busily taking apart more than a thousand recorded flashes and pops of EM noise, proving how each of them was nothing short of amazing.

"Punching out of wormholes, like they do," she said.

They let her sit at one end of the long table, talking as much as she wanted, right up until either T.T. asked a question or the manager told her to be quiet. Without question, this was the most imaginative creature that T.T. had ever endured. She was a burden and a revelation. He felt sorry for her. Particularly when she said, "I think you're a great man and the others don't realize that and can you imagine what kind of children we would make?"

"Quiet," said T.T.

"Shut up," the manager said.

T.T. turned to the manager. They were sitting close. The monitor in the tabletop was displaying an endless series of equations. The dynamics and density of every Wow was on display, including those few that might have come from nearby space.

"What does she mean?" T.T. asked.

Nobody spoke.

"Not about our children. I mean about the Wows' positions in the sky."

"None are tied to any star," the manager said. "Because they didn't come from any star we can see. I guess. According to her work . . . the aliens don't exist here. They live in alternate universes. In galaxies that might be our Milky Way, but with the suns out of position. Or they belong to entirely different universes, and these transmission points happen to be where they managed to punch through."

"Wormholes," the woman shouted.

A cryptographer took it upon himself to nudge her, hard. As if he might deliver a fierce smack if she spoke again.

T.T. lifted a hand.

Lowered it.

The manager spoke again. "The energy required to make a workable wormhole is enormous. You might doubt her calculations, because they seem awfully optimistic. She claims it requires the total detonation of five large stars, or their equivalent, to pierce the local universe, reaching into one of the trillion other realities inside the multiverse."

T.T. nodded.

He felt ill. Why was that?

"But to spend that much energy, that much money," T.T. began. Then he had to find a deep breath, just to say the next words. "Why would they go to that trouble, and then not say something we understand? Are they that different than us? Are they so stupid?"

"It's the wormhole," she shouted down the table. "It's too small and temporary, and they won't bother. Any information would get scrubbed out of the signal anyway."

The cryptographer reached for her.

She bit his hand.

And then the project manager—a gray cool fellow chosen for a thousand strengths that had nothing to do with abstractions and art—shouted at everyone in the room, and maybe across the entire world.

"This isn't what anyone goddamn wanted. But please, show some self-control here, people!"

T.T. found his wife at her boyfriend's house.

About the younger man's presence he said nothing. Nor did he explain when or how he knew about the affair, or that her youngest child had a strong resemblance to this fellow who was told to leave, complained briefly, and then was led outside by a couple bodyguards with strict orders not to harm anyone.

T.T. sat at one end of the sofa, shaking.

This man who never surprised his wife and himself was shaking, and he wasn't certain why.

"I'm not an alien," he began.

"I know you're not."

"I can't be, because there aren't any."

She nodded, waiting.

He explained. In crisp phrases and waves of both hands, T.T. described his afternoon and the lessons learned and how little sense it made to him. This wasn't what he anticipated, or wanted, and he didn't even care that he couldn't make money out of the work. That's how seriously this event weighed on his mind.

"But why aren't there aliens?" she asked finally.

"Because we'd see them," he said, angry that she couldn't anticipate the obvious. "If it's possible to blow up stars to punch a hole in space and time, then it's relatively easy to blow up stars to power transmitters, sending good long dense messages to everybody in your galaxy. Or for that matter, to souls who are a billion light years away from you. And we don't see that. We never see that. Which means that for whatever reason, intelligence is exceptionally rare. So rare that we might be the only ones."

The woman stood, took a step and sat again.

They were close now.

She felt pity and was probably going to touch him.

So he stood and said, "Don't."

"Don't what?"

He shook his head, unexpected words raining out of him.

"You get the children and one house, and if you say one ugly word about me, I swear, I'll have you strangled in your sleep."

There were no commercials.

T.T. demanded those terms.

The blonde woman sat where she had sat before, and T.T. was facing her the same as before. But this time he was flanked by his experts—the young physicist who spoke with impenetrable numbers; and the project manager who did his best to interpret what the madwoman was saying.

But most of the words came out of T.T.

Nobody knew the reason or reasons. But he repeated the unhappy truth that intelligence was extraordinarily rare in the Universe. That's what the lack of true messages proved. If the galaxy had just two other Earth-like worlds . . . planets with any organized, self-aware civilization . . . well then, the galaxy was beating the odds with that kind of wealth. But the most likely scenario was that nobody shared the Milky Way with humans and this one little world. Nobody now, and maybe nobody else ever. That was where the numbers led, and he had too much respect for numbers and their clarity to deny what the Big Hand had revealed to him.

The blonde nodded, and sighed, and she said, "Please, go on."

"The signals that we see . . . I don't know why they even bother," he admitted. "Blowing up suns to say nothing. How can that make sense?"

Then he was done talking, staring at the floor between him and the reporter.

Nobody else was speaking either.

For fifteen seconds, the network's only product was lost expressions and perfect silence.

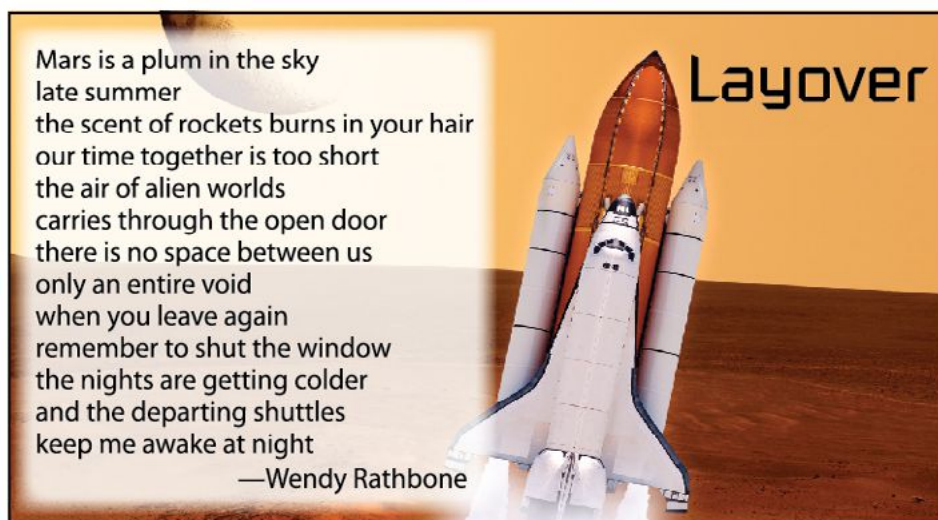
Thinking about silence made him even sadder.

With several million people watching, T.T. Hynes began to cry. Not like a man cries at a funeral or a sappy movie, but he wept like a little boy suffering some unfair, unloving horror that he surely didn't deserve.

And that's when the reporter stood.

She said nothing, kneeling beside her guest. Nothing was sexual about her posture or the moment. She simply got down to where she could see his wet eyes. Then she quietly reached out and touched T.T. on the closer arm.

"There's meaning in this gesture," she said. "And if that's all you can do, destroying five suns just to let another person feel your presence . . . well then, I guess that just has to be enough." ○



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THE GUN BETWEEN THE VERYUSH AND THE CLOUD MOTHERS

Anna Tambour

- 1 -

Two taps on the dish on her back, and Cheema flipped over from her crawl to a sitting position, shielded her eyes, and looked up at the pregnant clouds, gold with grains, red with fruits. The inside of her cheeks prickled and the pebble in her mouth slickened. She used the moment to slip a nipple into the mouth of the baby tied to her chest by her long hair, then rolled onto her knees and twitched her shoulders, settling the empty dish that covered her back from the top of her head to her buttocks. Made as it was from her mother's skin and bones, the dish was light, but its harness was bone-hard sinew that whenever she sat, yanked up at her armpits—her mother punishing her for her laziness.

On knees so calloused they were insensitive, she shuffled around, her fingers searching, sifting sand till she found what had made the sounds and fallen from her dish. She held her palm up, the two fat grains facing the cloud directly above.

"Ammaghleka! Mother Cloud. May your birthfall be heavy," she chanted, "and the joy you give lessen your pain."

She closed her fingers and beat the ground. "Pound the lazy among us to sand, or your birthings will be stolen by the beetles, to the *veryush* world below."

She swung her arm in a circle and glanced up toward the Above. All she could see of it were the cliffs that overlooked the sandscape, high and protecting like the rim over the base of a gatherer's dish. But just over the rim there was so much she imagined, only some of it from what she had been told, had heard at night when in the light of fire the tellers' cheeks shone sharp and hollow.

"We thank you who came before to the Above," she said now. "We thank you who saw our empty dish and knew how to fill it. Who created the gun, the well. Who built the temple and Arret and taught the first bof to follow your code. Who installed the first krez to follow your wisdom and keep order, as the krez knows the secrets of our hearts, our wish to think only of today, our hunger and thirst. And may the gun deafen us who live in the dish every seeding, and gunspit sting our eyes and noses. From pain comes joy."

Cheema had barely got those words out when the Cloud Mother above and her nearest sisters broke open in tumultuous birth. Cheema smiled at their force, their impatience. Just as she had done with Meem, every Cloud Mother, when her time finally came, pushed her birthing out with all her strength.

Cheema took up the enemy's position—a beetle when disturbed—pulling herself under her dish as much as she could. Sand spurted into her mouth from the pummeling. Sharp grains and round fruits the size of eyeballs but hard as knucklebones smacked the soles of her feet.

"Follwel . . . aulifers . . . furebril!" Half scream, half sob, she poured all the hope and passion of birthing, of life, into these memorized syllables so sacred they were only recanted sounds.

She would have added her own chant if she knew how to say what she felt—and besides, there was no one to send those strange thoughts *to*. You live, you suffer, you die. That was how her mother had lived, what she had said. *But there is more*. Cheema kissed Meem's head, and felt a squiggle in the pit of her stomach thinking of the time just before dark when Jahno would come to her on the sandscape, load her and Meem in his bag and take them home.

All over the sandscape, gatherers protected themselves in this first birthing. These were always the heaviest of the season. Children so small that the dishes they wore had tiny hands sticking out from their sides, wished to find their mothers to help shelter them, but could only scrunch themselves, for who could see through the birthings, hear past them?

And so no one saw or heard two thuds. Nor would any of the gatherers have recognized the individuals fallen to the sand as anyone but someone from Above, from Arret—soft pale faces, as fleshy as new-birthing fruit.

And no one saw that this birthing wasn't quite as heavy as they expected, in the way they'd expected. Just one hundred carrier-steps away from Cheema, four, five, six, perhaps ten adult carriers and a smattering of children were sent, by the first blast of the gun, to the *veryush* world below. On the sandscape, each body looked much the same as it had moments before: people scrunched into themselves till they looked like beetles—but as the blast settled, a leg here, an arm there, jerked, and below each one of these bodies, the sand made greedy noises as it gurgled blood as fast as it poured from all the holes punched through skin, flesh and bone by stone-hard seeds.

High-priest Orbof turned away from the edge and silently thanked his sons Orixibof and Bofiar, his two priests-in-training, for never taking heed of him. Bitterly, he thanked their repulsion at the hardness of the people who lived below—known only as the Belowers—and of himself.

It had been so quick.

Orixibof, his older son, the next bof, had been saying yet again “If you only—” when Orbof swung his staff, the legbone of his father.

Orixibof’s kneecap popped and he collapsed screaming. His younger brother Bofiar fell to the ground, grabbed Orbof’s bare feet, those feet that had made Bofiar so angry at his father’s shameful nakedness—so disgustingly brown and tough, so *Below*. Bofiar’s slobber now ran between Orbof’s toes. Bofiar’s cries sounded like wine bubbling. His father kicked him gently, just enough so that Bofiar rolled on his fleshy rump and his head was far enough away.

Then Orbof swung his staff. He smiled grimly when he saw the boy’s shaved skull splat.

The older brother was not as fortunate. He was still alive when Orbof grabbed his arm and leg. Orixibof’s scream changed to frantic curses when his father flung him off the edge.

The gun house was two hundred paces away. Everyone was busy doing something else, many of the Abovers primping for the biggest night of the year. But just in case, he walked like a high priest should, though it was torture not to run.

At first light, he had filled all six chambers with seed and grain, and set the gun. It would blast the first seedings into the Cloud Mothers as soon as he was safely far away, back in Arret—and that punch into the guts of the Mothers would force their birthings to pour forth. The time now would be midway between the first seeding of the year and the second—each blast spaced to make a total of the sacred six in the long daylight.

He reached the door. Beside it, the plaque embedded in the fake rock looked the same as ever. Orbof smiled grimly as he read yet again the words his sister taught him how to read: “Dedicated to Simon Ng.” His sons had never asked him about what they still thought of as boring decoration. A sliver of rock was jammed into the keyhole, and the door handle had been smashed. Who could have done this? The only person in Arret strong enough, the only person who worked with his muscles, was the baker. What had Orixibof threatened him with?

Orbof felt something sticky under his bare feet—like dried blood, thick drying firstfeast wine leaked from under the door. The only opening to the gun room was the same one the barrel stuck out of, hanging out over the cliff. He couldn’t see in, but he could imagine. Orixibof must have done *something*. Bofiar, the sneak, was probably just caught up in Orixibof’s treachery, hoping to get something from it or on him.

Orbof had not told anyone that this year the oll could not possibly last through the seedings. He had tampered with the gauge reading so that neither of his sons would know. And with those trainee priests ignorant, he had planned for readiness. He wondered whether he had tampered with the gauge to fool himself, using his sons as an excuse. *I’ve talked to them for years, but then one day follows the next, and it’s so much easier to talk than . . . than what?*

Orixibof had certainly acted, but what had he done?

Orbof threw back his head and laughed as he never had. My boys! Both jokesters! From their first day as trainee priests, he had tried his hardest to instill in them a realization that their future here was limited because the well would dry, how soon he couldn’t say. He had warned them that this knowledge was dangerous—something only priests know. Years ago he had tried, but failed, to harden them physically for the great trip to unknown lands, that, if he were no longer alive, Orixibof as the next bof, or Bofiar if that post should fall to him, would have to lead. That attempt to harden them physically and prepare them mentally had taken place when the last krez was alive.

He squeezed the tight skin on his thigh till it turned blue. He'd had his suspicions that Orixibof, the willful one, would be impatient, would do something terrible. *I told him too much, too little. How many times did he tell me that he was ready to be bof, that I want the well to run dry. That I liked hardship. That I hoped for the end of the world. That if this end ever happens, the position of bof, the temple, will be ruined. How many times did Orixibof tell me, brag to me, that all his friends in Arret laughed at me. That they had taken to calling me what he did: "old fearful one." "So what of those Below?" he used to say. "You are as fussy and frightened, as soft-minded as an old woman. If only you used fear."*

And Bofiar! Soft as a suckling. Just two years younger, he had never wanted to grow up. He'd only wanted to be carried along by anything that took no effort on his part, and really only wanted to spend his days stuffing his face and playing holwo—anything to avoid learning the code, learning to read the clouds. Anything to avoid thinking about the end of the comfortable world.

Orbof threw his hands up, and his throat constricted with a cry he choked. The high priest could not now rescind his oldest son's command, though Orixibof had been so proud of it that he had blurted out the whole thing when his father tracked him and his brother down here, when they should have been preparing in the temple, as priests, for their ceremonial duties.

"You sneak-footed, bone-handed sweeper," Orixibof had shouted when Orbof had demanded to know why he was here, what business he had with Jahno, the lead carrier who himself should be waiting Below to go from gatherer to gatherer, for the season's first load of seedings for the temple.

What would Jahno make of the command? Now Orbof couldn't ask for him, but he felt again the shock at seeing his sons standing by the gun house talking to Jahno, and then seeing Jahno rush toward a ladder.

Orixibof had been so proud of his plan that his admission had been a brag, a dare, a condemnation as he spat out the details to his father. He had told Jahno about Firstfeast, pointed out the ground, had explained to the carrier about drunkenness, and commanded the man to come up at the chilliest time of night when the people would be so drunk they wouldn't know. The carrier was to pull the shoes off everyone but himself and Bofiar, and to throw all the shoes away, over the cliff. That was fine with Orixibof. He couldn't imagine the Belowers knowing how to use them. Then Jahno was supposed to get his ten best carriers up here, and to load themselves with all that they could carry, of grain, drink, and fruit. Jahno himself was to carry Orixibof, and the next strongest carrier, Bofiar. Another two carriers would carry two nubile girls each, that Orixibof would point out if he were sober enough. If not, Jahno had to choose. They'd be unconscious, most likely, so wouldn't fight. Anyone who made noise or fought was to be clubbed silent.

"We are leaving, making a new life out there," Orixibof had said, pointing to the mountains.

"And you think that the carriers are going to obey you, to abandon their families to carry you and the women you want for you? And to the unknown?"

"I know," said Orixibof. "I told them that the Cloud Mothers demanded their sacrifice, reminded them: from pain comes joy. And I told him that the Cloud Mothers had told me to strike you dead and the krez, too, for disobeying them. So I am not only the voice of the Cloud Mothers, but their protector, one who they displease at their life's worth."

"Bofiar? You agreed to this?"

Bofiar sniggered.

Orixibof's eyelids drooped, but not fast enough for his father to miss the older boy's plan, to rid himself of Bofiar, too.

So Orixibof had been unfocused, smirking mid-plan when his father struck . . .

The head carrier was uncharacteristically jogging, back straight—like a common dung collector. Not walking with the usual unmistakable slow, bent-over dignity.

“Later,” said Orbof to himself. Nothing could be done about Jahno just now. The high priest mumbled something incomprehensible, composed his face, and walked as a high priest should, to the temple.

Down in the sandscape, cries of thanks were drowned out by the sharp hard sounds of fat heavy grains hitting sand, rocks, dried-skin dishes; and the softer sounds of the little round fruits sometimes smashing but more often bouncing and rolling. Cheema tipped herself onto her elbows, spat the pebble out of her mouth, placed it beside her mother’s forefinger in the bag that hung from her neck. She placed the two grains in her mouth, one by each cheek, as the custom was for every gatherer. Her hands free for a moment, she held her baby closer to her, ignoring the ache in her back.

“Mother clouds,” she said silently, “This is my first season. Let this not be my last. Mother Clouds, see Meem, my fruit. If you can talk to those who seed you, tell them.” There was no word for “pity” in Cheema’s language, so her talk to the Cloud Mothers had no reason, but it was something that she did every day, something that first came from her with no warning two monmoths ago when, in the middle of retying her hair around her newborn of only a few days, she brazenly talked in her own thoughtwords to the Cloud Mothers—just as she would have liked to speak to her mother who’d felt the rip of flesh, the terror, pain, and joy that is birth. Her mother’s tug at her armpits was so sharp then that she didn’t know which shame she felt more—shame as a daughter, as a gatherer, as a mate, a lover.

You live, you weaken, sicken, or you are struck by a falling boulder. Or . . . (the unspoken of. You are hit by a load of seeds or fruits that, instead of being sent from a gun up to a cloud, fly at the gatherers, who pay for the gun’s moment of weakness with their lives.)

A terrible death, this miss. The skin of the gatherer would be so filled with holes that no dish could be made of it. The gatherer, often a mother herself, would be left where she collapsed, her sucking pebble in her mouth, her dish on her back, her bag with a mother’s finger caught between her and the sand—and if the woman had a suckling, every mother hoped that the breath was crushed out of it with its mother’s last breaths, for no one could suckle another’s.

Twice Cheema had come across veryushi. The first time, Cheema’s fingers caught in the hair that held the baby. Cheema swallowed her pebble in fright and spilled her almost filled dish. She shuffled away so fast that she tore her calluses. The second time Cheema found a buried treasure of grains and fruits—both dried so much that they were not good for eating, but perfect for a gun. Then she found the rim of the dish. The veryush was buried underneath. Cheema wondered that time whether there was a baby attached. Without being able to see how the woman wore her hair, it was impossible to tell, but Cheema began to think of her. This was shortly after Cheema knew that she would be a mother. A seeding had just deafened her, and created confusion in her head. The gun blasts were so loud that her ears played her tricks, telling her that the gun seeded at night, though everyone knew that it only poured seed into the clouds while the sun watched.

During the seeding, her eyes stung. But that was the good sting, the good stink, the good sounds—as good comes from pain.

That was what Cheema had thought. But then her mother died, and then Jahno asked her to share a hearth. At Jahno’s first seeding there was pain, yes, but pain she wanted to feel more of. She and he had laughed when she told him that before

him, she had thought that the greatest pleasure a person could have after not being hungry or thirsty was to scratch an itch.

Cheema felt something for Jahno that her mother couldn't have taught her any more than a mother could teach a daughter to become a Cloud Mother.

And then Meem came, and the pull on Cheema's nipples made her thoughts change even more as her milk flowed. These—Jahno, her seeder, and Meem, her first birthing—caused her the worst pain that she had ever known, but not in the ways that her mother had taught her to expect. The thought of something causing *them* pain made Cheema's eyes prickle, her throat close up. She wanted to protect them. She wanted to live for them as long as she could, in her life that would be, surprisingly, all too short. The only time Cheema had ever seen her mother smile was when she died—a confusing, terrifying grimace. Cheema wondered if, at the end, her mother rebelled, escaped from life and its pain.

Now she really understood all the bits from the Cloud Mothers that fell about a monmoth after their birthings. Withered brown shreds and tough, twisted cords—Cheema had withered scraps of bag that had been around Meem inside her, and the twisted cord that had held Meem to her. The Mothers birthed the same, just with more and smaller babies. But they seemed to never grow old, never get struck to death.

What if a seeding hits me, sends me to the veryush world below? Will I drop into a kneel forever, to be covered by sand and raining fruit and grains? End as frightening, untouchable as where the beetles go? Now she felt something else when she came upon a veryush. If she was far enough from any otherone on the sandscape, she stroked the forehead, untied the bag around its neck, placed the bag in the curl of a hand.

She didn't wear a charm, though this year the wrists of almost every gatherer clattered with them. The number of veryushi had increased so much in the last few birthing seasons that grim jokes crackled in dark recesses at night, outrageous blasphemies whispered mouth to mouth by the young and unburdened as their hips ground against each other.

There was no word for "luck" in Cheema's language, but now that she thought of her first great pain, and heard yet another Cloud Mother giving birth, she pushed two fingers into the space between her hair holding her baby's head to her breast, and felt the baby's mouth. A flow poured through Cheema's body, something so strong that tears sprang forth, precious tears that made her stop and wipe them, to lick from her hand. In the tumult of the first day of this year's Cloud Births, the murmurs of thankfulnesses all around, she had said the prayer that is said to the gun that seeds the Mothers. She did not have a picture in her mind of the gun, though she had giggled with other girls that the legs attached to the gun must be equally big, and what about the arms that could hold you at night! Jokes her mother wouldn't have approved of. Some rumors were that there was not one gun but five guns—called "gun" no one knows the reason for, but meaning truly enormous men, none of whom can live close enough to each other to collect in one place, so they position themselves around the rim of the dish so they can keep each other in view. Each drinks what he sucks up from the rock's bones—marrow? Slippery and rich and endless, as the bones of the Earth go down as far as the Earth does—and who knows the end of that? And when each giant is full, his lips wet and fat, he demands grain and fruits, oh he is greedy. So many grains and fruits that once a year, his stomach grows big and painful. He's been so greedy for so long that for days he spits, filling the clouds with grains and fruits, filling the ears of all on the land with the terror and joy of his indigestion. So much for seeding, the rumors go, and there is ribald laughter then. How would you like your man to seed you this way, goes the joke—and then the teller turns around and farts.

So there were many explanations of the gun—something to be awed by as well as be terrified of in a disgusted way—when the gun is too weak to properly seed a Mother, but just strong enough to accidentally kill an innocent on the sandscape. As accidentally, most people felt, as an old man's dribble.

Some said the gun was something far more unbelievable, something not alive at all, that it did things because the others, the ones who came before, gave it commands. A giant bone? And the well? The guts of the mountains, went one explanation. Another rumor warned that the well was nothing to be awed about, to pray to. It is a dish, merely a dish, and our prayers are for it to be full and not empty. What's so strange about what we hope for every gatherer's dish?

Cheema wondered sometimes, particularly when the air stunk and her eyes and nose prickled as if with bone splinters from the fine droplets of the gun's spit. She didn't really think one explanation was the right one any more than she knew what many of the words in the prayers meant.

Of the Cloud Mothers themselves, Cheema wondered about their lives. One day when she was still a girl, she saw a woman scream as she died in childbirth: "Cloud Mothers, you will cry again!"

Cheema had already heard in snatches that she pieced together as children do, that when the world was very harsh and the Cloud Mothers only children, they thought only of themselves. They wandered all over the sky doing nothing useful, but crying like babies left to die. That was when no one could have lived here. No people, at least. The gun was built by a few fathers and mothers many times back, of the Belowers themselves—Cheema's own people—just when the clouds were old enough to be mothers. The gun stopped the wandering of the selfish clouds, and made them Mothers. Only when the Cloud Mothers were made useful, fruitful, dry-eyed, and they showered their birthings upon the sands could people live here, so the priests and leaders came, and then the Belowers and beetles down here, too.

It was all so confusing.

That night, the death of the mother was still so fresh that home smelt of umbilical-ropes blood. Cheema's mother's face looked softened in the fire's light, so Cheema touched her mother's shoulder for permission to speak, and then whispered her question, if this were true—that the Cloud Mothers had once played all over the sky, and done nothing but cry.

"Crying does nothing. Come," said her mother, leading Cheema to the recess furthest away from the communal fire. And there Cheema's mother wrapped her digging stick in a scrap of fruit mat and beat Cheema until the girl learnt to cry with no expression, no sound, and most, especially, no wasteful tears.

This birthfall was so heavy that she pulled her knees up as high as she could underneath and tucked her head down till her nose rested on Meem's forehead. "Who knows up there, Meem?" she said. "Maybe only the bof in the temple. After all, he knows the Cloud Mothers, and commands the gun: plant seed. Or,"—she kissed the milk-smelling flesh—"Maybe only the krez."

Jahno had seen the outside of the temple, but was strangely unimpressed. "Home looks better," he had told her. She smiled to herself. Maybe he had said this because, in the monmoths when even the beetles had nothing to take to the veryush world, he was chief carver of entrances here. His adornments not only surrounded the door openings of the carriers' and gatherers' complexes, but because of his love of Below, the doorways of even the lowest sectors.

The shower slowed till individual plops could be heard. Cheema took her pebble out of her bag, put it in her mouth, and continued sweeping the ground with her hands and tossing grains and fruit into her dish, all in fluid gestures. She was so

practiced that her thoughts wandered to the time monmoths back, when, while she was sweeping, a veryush had flown through the air to land almost on her, but the krez himself had stumbled upon her instead, almost tearing the hair from her head. That was when she was big with Meem.

As her thoughts wandered, she gathered within a few shuffles of the knees from the spot that Jahno had left her this morning. Today's first birth over her had been so heavy and impatient that Cheema's dish was soon full, and though the sand around her was piled with grains and fruits, she was surrounded by an area of peace as other gatherers worked below violent birthings in the distance. She thanked the Cloud Mother above, and waited. If she had not had Meem she could have stretched her legs and laid herself flat under the weight of her dish, but now she could only crouch. Soon a loader would come. Already the landscape was a scurry of loaders. They ran as fast as beetles, and looked like them. But these loaders worked under the Sun, not the Moon. Their heads protected by skin-hats held out on stalks of sinew, they rushed to the gatherers, scooping up the birthings into clusters of soft collecting bags tied with gut that loaders carried, hanging from their neck, waist, arms, and hips, front and back. The loaders then ran, their bags banging musically, to the base of the ladders where the elite of carriers would turn their backs on them for the loaders to pour the birthings into the carriers' massive birthing bags—carriers like Jahno whose bag towered over the top of his head and ended halfway down massive thighs.

As Cheema waited, she saw him in her imagination. Chosen by the other carriers for the third season, he might already be first carrier up a ladder—with the first temple offering.

It was getting hard to breathe under the dish, it was so heavy, so she looked up with a smile when she heard running steps.

"Cheema!"

It was Jahno. He knelt and used his arms like a beetle, scooping up everything in her dish with two sweeps of his arms, one half to one side of her, in a long pile, and the other half shoved out anywhere.

"Put your arms back." It was a command, but she was slow, her face slack in fright and questions. He ripped the straps off her dish, his hands against her skin, protecting her. He tossed the dish aside.

"My mother's—"

"We'll find it again." He slung off his bag, stood up and crouched. "I must put you in."

He scooped up Cheema and loaded her, touching her head, and through her hair, Meem. She and Meem disappeared in its depths.

"Cheema," he said, but though he was respected as the strongest and best-built carrier, he was no runner. He was running now, so he said nothing more. Cheema was as silent then as she'd been during Meem's frightening, long, painful birthing—and Meem was a baby—trained since birth—for silence and acceptance.

- 2 -

Monmoths before, when the Cloud Mothers were all green—

Numer 6, the new krez of only a monmoth, sat in the swivel chair at the altar. At the end of his left-hand armrest, the skull of the high priest Bofe, Orbof's predecessor, looked out, his eyes stuffed with wires. They were twisted in such a way that Bofe's gaze was wise, thoughtful. Numer 5 stared out from the right, or rather his

hollow-eyed skull—too newly installed for his son to have chosen yet what expression to give it. At the moment Numer was inclined to leave the eye sockets as Numer 5's had been much of the time. To each krez (and high priest) went the decision. And each could take what their joint predecessors had to give.

Numer ran a finger over the curves and faultlines on his father's skull. He felt not only wisdom but cruelty, laziness, and fear of fear. Fear of Numer's mother's superstitions, her stories of the well running dry. When Numer was only as high as his father's knees, his father overheard what the kreza, Numer's mother, thought were private words with her son. She was thrown to her death for her "ignorant babble"—left to dry with her bowels still in her, nothing taken, unboned as if she had no one—left on the sandscape, down Below. Numer clutched the bag at his neck. He held only the memories of her. The winds of her fears blew within him—and her foolish bravery. After all, she had first told Numer's father of her superstitions, though she knew he had had a priest tossed from the throwing place for saying less.

Numer 6—somewhat young to be a krez, but his father's liver was reported to have been enormous—spent more days brooding on the chair. He had told Orbof that he needed solitude to be with his father—and when Orbof didn't believe that one, that he was finally applying himself to studying the altar, its sequences and controls that he would jointly work with the high priest, come next seeding—"and don't worry. I won't load anything or shoot." Numer thought of other things, and finally decided that there were so many problems in looking for his mother that he had to go look. *I am my mother's son.*

A krez did not go Below. Everyone lived Above or Below, and the last ones from Above who had visited were before the time of the first and great Krez Numer, who had invented the birthing gauge. At first the krezes used the birthing gauge and read the clouds (and the priests stayed in the temple), but since Numer 3 was usually too drunk, the task of cloud reading had passed to the high priest. *You line up the gauge with the part of each cloud closest to the horizon.* . . . Orbof had shown Numer as a boy, but you needed practice, and Orbof carried the gauge.

So, since the gauge, there was no reason for anyone to go Below, and they couldn't steal the grain and fruits, but had to bring up whatever the season's order. Carriers and anyone else who came up from Below for any work came up the ladders (which were rolled up each night) and walked to their assigned place, and, before evening, descended. They didn't have sandals, which made it more difficult for them to walk Above, where the ground was all sharp-edged stone, except for the floor of the temple, which was cold, shiny, imitation stone with a raised grain pattern. Of all the people of Arret, only Orbof walked unshod, for some reason tossing his sandals off the edge on the day of his father's death—the day he became the bof.

No one Below knew how many people lived Above in Arret, and, for that matter, no one Above knew how many lived Below, just as those Below did not know how many beetles lived below them. All that, Numer had been taught not only by his father, but by his mother and by Orbof, the high priest. This keeps us alive, and ensures that the Cloud Mothers' birthings feed us, they had told him. And Orbof explained further, when Numer questioned: "Don't tell your father you asked, and don't, if you value me, tell him I told you this. We Abovers are few, which keeps us in wine and grain. They are as many as beetles are to them, and could never be satisfied if they were given enough. And they would overrun us. They are happy with what we let them have Below because without us, the gun wouldn't seed, the Cloud Mothers would be barren . . . and yes, only my two priests and I know how to seed, but they don't know that."

Below. The place where gatherers crawl. Below, at the base of the cliffs out of sight but not out of imagined smell and sight—skinning works, boners, glue-boilers,

dyeworks and tanneries, string and cordmakers, dung dryeries (for Abovedung fuel and Below)—and somewhere on the sandscape, Numer's mother's body. He hoped that she had not been buried by the sand to more than a hand's breadth, for below Below belonged to the beetles, and even Numer's reckless bravery broke there.

Numer wasn't sure how to go Below. Orbof wouldn't let him, but Orbof was too protective. *Think like Orbof. Be clever and I won't be noticed.* Certainly, he didn't have enough duties as krez for anyone to notice his disappearance if it weren't for too long. She couldn't be that hard to find. His first idea was to disguise himself as a carrier, but that was before he observed them close enough to see that they never sat, never laid a bag aside. Were there spare bags anywhere Above? Numer didn't know, so he went to the temple to think in its quiet, to sit in the chair that was shared by the krez and the high priest.

Alone in the temple, he again liked the idea of pretending to be a carrier. He threw off his cloak and looked at his reflection on the wall—tall, even for an Abover—with wide shoulders. As he examined himself, he imagined how much his torso would hold loaded on a carrier's back. He dwarfed them.

"Each has strength, as the saying goes," said Orbof.

Numer snatched up his cloak and held it to his body. It scratched, the hair being woven so that the inside only was smooth. Numer felt the skin on his face burn.

Orbof gazed at the floor as if it interested him. "Confide in me."

"My father did," Numer sneered.

Orbof walked to the open door of the temple, closed and bolted it. He punched a place on the wall, and the room filled with a voice speaking in the measured tone that the priests and Orbof used during seeding time. Then Orbof stroked the wall and the voice speeded up and became a high-pitched mockery. He scratched it louder.

Numer put his hands over his ears. He would have yelled at Orbof but he knew he would not be heard. He would have stormed out if he could have, but didn't know how to open the door. Instead, he spoke with his eyes as Orbof came within a hand of him, and closer.

"Your father heard what he willed."

Numer stepped away from Orbof. Orbof came forward and cradled the empty bag that hung against Numer's windpipe.

"Son of your mother," he said, and caught Numer in his arms as the krez he had played with as a baby collapsed in tears.

Numer pulled away. "You told my father to have her killed."

"I could not stop him."

"But she blasphemed. It *must* have been your order."

"Not blasphemy. Prophesy. I told her that the well could dry. I thought that she could say what I could not. She had a way of soothing your father. But she knew more. She had read what I cannot, these inscriptions for instance."

"You cannot?"

Orbof hunched into himself. "Not since the separation."

"Before we came?"

"Your father's people. Yes."

"No wonder you can't do right. Your people worked like blindmen, seeding clouds with no one to say who got which birthings, how anyone would live." Numer narrowed his eyes at Orbof's bent frame. "Stand upright when I talk!"

"Yes, Mister Krez!" Orbof struck his staff on the floor, snapped his body erect, and dropped his eyelids halfway down—performing a perfectly formed bof-to-krez salute.

"Tell me," demanded Numer. "Lift your head! Was my mother right about the separation? That you're left up here?"

Orbof's eyes roamed the young krez's face. "The bof line. But that was so long ago it doesn't—"

"Could my mother . . . and the Belowers . . . and you? . . . You don't tell, but your throat-stone jumps. It's true!" Numer's hands convulsed on the skulls.

"Your people couldn't feed yourselves, till you found us."

Numer shook his finger at Orbof. "Beetles feed themselves. Don't talk of such Below worths. But why would my father's father pollute our line with yours?"

"We bofs are all possible fathers, as are you krezes. But though all the learnings and skills of our line were shoved down to the Below, now lost to the Belowers, ruined generations ago by the pain and difficulty of their lives, the mothers of our bof line have kept the language, learned the texts, calculated far beyond what I can with my simple tools. There is a room beyond that was only ever used by mothers of our line. Your father demanded it be sealed. My father Bofe knew the end would come, and Arboth before him—possibly from their mothers. Why this way? I don't know. But it's easier, and comforting to learn ceremony, to memorize, to carry out procedures as before. I taught you the order of the levers there before you, and wasn't it comforting? Didn't you feel strength flow into you from the knowledge that all you had to do was push when I say 'Koruy'?"

"You . . . suckling! What use is your power if it does nothing? Why are you even in the temple?"

"Probably punishment at first," Orbof said, "separating the first bof and a few cohorts from the rest of us here who were here before you."

"Why?" Numer demanded. It wasn't even a demand, but a negation.

The high priest's ire was roused. "I can seed the clouds. Every bof has done that, and known what to do. And none of you. What are you worth?"

"We make sure—"

"From the first day you invaded with your excuses that we *needed* you, every Numer and all of his cohorts up here has lost more strength, and never had any purpose. Drink and play!"

Numer was so still that it was impossible to see if he were lost in thought or avoiding it. But Orbof was boiling over. "Your father taking your mother was an idea of our fathers' fathers. It was meant to give you, at least in a krez, what your line has lost. Some—"

"My father weak? You pushed my mother—"

"I told her of my fears, but she had already pleaded with your father to prepare. She said she knew what to do, but that only made him angrier. . . . How could I tell your father anything?" Orbof sighed. "You are weaker than a loop of baby's drool, and you know best. What fate have I, if I tell you truth instead of what you want to hear? Fat wet lies?"

Numer jumped out of the chair and leapt at Orbof. He dug his fingernails into Orbof's shoulders, pushed his face so close he saw himself in the black of Orbof's eyes.

"To a son who is soft in sinew, you would drip the truth?"

"Through the lips of your mother."

"Do you think my mother will call to me down there?"

Orbof's eyes dropped to Numer's throat. "Numer the Sixth. Do you want the truth?"

Numer's eyes filled with tears that overflowed. Orbof wiped them with a hand too hard for a proper priest, let alone any Abover.

No krez had ever gone Below before, so when Numer descended, he had much to remember. He saw for the first time the long line of carriers going up the five hair-rope ladders. They toted bags the length of their torsos, so filled that they looked like

each carrier was carrying the body of another. "Do not bend or kneel," Orbof had instructed. "Walk over the land and the people in it, but think of yourself gauging, as I do the clouds. You are seeking something beyond the Belowers' understanding. Remember that. You are krez."

Numer had nodded, thinking that his father's level of understanding had only reached the depths of a cup.

"Though any gatherer could carry two of you," Orbof said, "do not ask them to do anything for you. And remember how bent their backs are." Orbof pushed his hand against Numer's chest and the small of his back. "Stand tall!" he said. "And most important of all, if you want to find your mother, use the gatherers. Give them this bone to dig with, and *command* then. Otherwise they won't dig. At least that's what I've been told. And hide your revulsion when you see them. The best way is not to look at them. Just tell them what to do." And no. Orbof had never seen a gatherer, never been below. Who from Above had, in living memory? No one, but who'd ever seen a Cloud Mother up close, or seen the well?

So Numer walked the sandscape poking his staff at anything that jutted. Carriers walked past him in their loadings-up from the gatherers. He didn't look directly at gatherers whenever he found something. He had them dig it up, at first ignoring their reluctance, their fear. Time and again, the uncovered would be what they called a ver-ush—a body folded on itself, its head sunk into its chest or ripped off. Useless skin torn to rags. The first time he asked how this came to be, the explanation he got from the gatherer was something so unbelievable that he didn't question it. That story came from a male so wizened it was impossible to tell if he was young or old—and since there was nothing as low as a male gatherer, Numer didn't wonder that this story came from him. The next time Numer called a gatherer to uncover something his toe caught, it was a female with a young child beside her. She told the child to gather, and shook as she uncovered the corpse, hiding it with her own body from the sight of her child. It was a male, useless to Numer, but he asked her why she feared it, and she told him the same story.

Numer kicked the third of these ver-ush things right out of the sand. Its skin was so ragged that the ribs were as open as a hand. A female-child? A dish was still attached to arms torn from their sockets. Numer jumped backward and fell over a gatherer. As he fell, his hand hit the bone that secured her hair. She fell onto her side, and her dish spilt a few grains.

When he sat up, he saw her confusion. She wore no wig, of course. They were forbidden to the Belowers. Her hair tumbled over her face and spread out on the ground. With her dish on, she could not put it up as her arms were too constricted, and having it hang was not only forbidden, but would catch her knees. He could not help looking at the stuff. It shined like the oll in the skull that Orbof anointed the temple with, the oll that fed the gun so that it could seed the clouds, the oll that his mother said came from the well that was running dry, the oll that Numer's father said would be in the well forever as long as everyone, Numer and his mother included, lived as they were born to, and didn't question.

He sniffed. None of that rich stink on her. And none of the sour smell common to everyone in Arret. *She doesn't wash with wine.* She smelled of warm clean sand and—herself? She sat unnaturally still, her hands on her knees. A gulp of bile jumped up his throat at the sight of them. *Gatherers are as deformed as I've been told.*

She couldn't put her hair up now because taking the dish off was something forbidden once the gathering day began. He knew because he'd learnt that much already. She raised her face, and it was the most beautiful he had ever seen—nothing like the pasty moonfaces of the Abovers. Her skin was so plain. No crushed rock had ever stained her.

In her dishevelment she not only disgraced herself—she was forbidden to be looked upon by others. “Make yourself seeable,” he said. “And tell me how to take your dish off.” She was too frightened to answer with words, but she could see from his lack of purpose and his magnificent cape that he was Numer, the young krez everyone whispered of. She motioned and pointed. He unclasped the dish and laid it on the sand, then watched her as she took a comb from the sack around her neck and deftly arranged her hair. As long as a gun, he thought, and as precious. He looked at her face and didn’t want to look away. He wanted to look at her body, the whole of it, but he could not. It was as folded as his mother said they were. He couldn’t help but see the thick grey pads that stuck out from around her knees. His mother had described the pads, saying that gatherers didn’t even have proper skin, that they couldn’t breed with anyone but carriers. That the soles of sandals were made of gatherers’ knees. He hadn’t believed his mother then, just as he didn’t about the well. Looking at this gatherer now, he imagined her with thin fine skin covering long legs. He imagined her as someone who was born on the top of the cliff. *Enough. She was born Below.*

She no longer looked at him. Her eyelashes made long shadows on her cheeks. She was still, waiting, frightened.

All the near gatherers had crawled away. Numer picked up her dish, held it against his chest, felt its lightness. *I am alone with this one gatherer and the body that landed beside her, the body with skin like rags, the body that wind makes music with, scraping sand against the ribs.*

“Speak,” he said, pointing to it. “A ver-ush one?”

She flicked her eyes at him, at it. “*Ver-yush*. So they say.”

“And you?”

“One day a seedgun could kill me. On my mother, I do not deserve to die veryush.”

“So you say a gun did this?”

Her fingers clutched each other.

“You say?” he demanded.

“They say.”

“And you?”

“There is one time a gatherer is filled with grain or fruit.”

“When?” he said. “Why riddle me now? At Give Thanks, of course. We feast then, too. And do you feast at seeding?”

“One time filled, for some.” She nodded her head at the body. “At seeding, death.”

Numer rocked back on his heels. He had lost himself, and stood up with a flush heating his cheeks. This gatherer had confirmed what the others had said. This proved another thing his mother had said to him. That the gun was not so mighty. That the seedings didn’t all get to the Cloud Mothers, that sometimes things happened that no temple regimen nor Orbof could fathom, or fix.

“She’s here,” Jahno called. His breath came out in gasps. “Go,” said the voice of an old woman.

Cheema felt Jahno squat on his haunches. Long fingers pried open the ties on the bag. Cheema looked up and a bald-headed woman with a nose crooked as a finger smiled down. Jahno pulled his massive shoulders free as she held the bag. Cheema held Meem to her as he scooped her out with one arm. For a brief moment, she felt his embrace, and then he was gone, pulling on the bag as he ran out of this dim chamber. His rush disturbed the air, not stale but . . .

Cheema wrinkled her nose.

“The dyers’ quarter,” the woman apologized. “It’s nothing like yours.”

Cheema didn't know what to say, so said nothing. She tried to smile at the woman, but couldn't help shaking. The woman had never been a gatherer, that was clear. She couldn't crawl at all. One leg bent as no leg can without being broken, and one arm hung slack a hand lower than the other. She was naked as an empty dish.

She half-walked, half-hopped to a niche in the wall, from which she pulled a little bag. She tossed the bag to Cheema. "It may smell a little different here, but eat."

The woman laid a piece of dung on the fire, and in the heightened light observed Cheema while the young woman chewed the moisture out of a handful of last year's fruits. Meem whimpered and the old woman nodded as she watched the mother settle the baby with a simple wriggle.

"You will be safe here," she said. And seeing Cheema's back jerk, "And Jahno."

Cheema fought away tears. All of her upbringing was falling away, or was she ripping herself out of it?

What is happening? Are you the Crooked One? She wanted to ask so much, but she felt her mother's eyes on her, her mother's words whenever she had asked. *To question is to change. So you wish change on us?* Jahno knew something, had brought her here of all places, not only to the dyers' quarter, but to this woman in it who had to be the one who fell when Cheema's own body was changing from girl to woman. This had to be the one Cheema's mother had sworn was a curse, and the one she had said not to ask about. So Cheema hadn't, and had forgotten all about her. *He would never question how I gather. How I weave capes for Above.*

Cheema glanced up, and away. She held her head down.

To Cheema's surprise, the bald-headed, twisted woman of many mothers fear-stories to babies now sat down beside her, took her hand, and lowered her own face so that she could look up into Cheema's. She smoothed Cheema's hair apart. "You may ask," she said. Her handbones felt sharp, but her touch was so gentle, like nothing Cheema had ever felt from her own mother's muscled hand.

"Everything changes," began the woman. "You should have seen my hair cloak . . ."

- 3 -

Today, the greatest day of joy in the year, his very first birthing as krez, Numer's thoughts stumbled. He could have been forgiven for thinking only *I am the Sixth! Imagine how long ago the First lived, and what he did to establish civilization here. But I'll be the most remembered.* After all, many boys in Arret were his age.

Orbof had just rushed into the temple, muttering some excuse about not being here first, and another something about starting immediately, though it was evident that his staff of two priests-in-waiting, his own sons, were not here in the temple where they should have been busy with underling duties, or at least pretending to be. The bof seemed somewhat distracted, *but then*, thought Numer, *I must like as calm as a wall cracking. The birthing has begun and here I am in the temple with Orbof and the council, all according to custom.*

They had greeted each other with proper ritual, and all had been almost as he had been taught, except for the missing underlings, but that was nothing. The older one was the same age as Numer, but though Numer was already Numer 6, the sixth krez in history, Numer didn't want to think of having to share power with whichever of these boys would outlive his father to be bof. Every time Numer had seen them, they performed their duties with a high-fashion laziness from the younger, and a surliness from the older that barely hid something stronger—hate? Numer had not had much to do with them—their education having been kept strictly separate from his own—but

from what he'd observed and heard of the older one especially, he hoped Orbof lived long and watched his back. So they weren't here now—probably off teasing sweepers who were busy cleaning the streets from any stray falling grains and fruits. Pulling grains and fruits out of the sweepers' bags, or spitting into the bags before the poor sweepers could toss these bits of birthings off the cliffs, down to the gatherers. *Those sweepers will be exhausted when they finally climb down the ladders tonight!*

All the excitement and the joy of the birthing, and the tremendous noise of it falling on Below—and Numer suddenly felt sick at the thought of the great loads coming up, the drunken Firstfeast night tonight, its wines reserved for the occasion—his father's night of nights each year, the next day a terror for all around him. He wondered what it felt like Below to be there under a birthing. It must be terrifying.

Orbof and the three councilors had made mothering noises over him. "He's nervous. Here, a cup of this old wine." They sat him in the special chair. Now his stomach ached. He'd rather they'd have put a pebble in his mouth, not that even Orbof knew about the pebbles.

He really felt like smashing something. His breath came out in jerks, but he sat where he was put, scratching at the end of the right-hand armrest—his father's skull. The bof had been keeping something from him, he was sure of it. Something since the seeding, maybe before. Numer's feelings had been growing like a boil. Although the Cloud Mothers looked fat and healthy, their colors going from the normal brown at seeding to green and then gold for grain and patchy red and green for fruit, Orbof had taken up a new habit of sitting on the edge of the cliff and watching them. He had started asking Numer odd questions too, such as what Numer thought of the ones Below. Had he seen where they lived, seen the dung driers, the boners and skinners, the stocks of bags and dishes? What did they eat, did Numer know? Beetles? Did they make wine with the amount of birthings they were allowed to keep? Had Numer done as the Orbof warned him against—and looked at gatherers?

Orbof was busy covering his normally almost-naked body with the fragile sacred robe. Knee-length, made of some cloth that wasn't pounded fruit husk, it was woven, not of hair like Numer's cape, but of twisted hairlike fibers the colors of eyewhite. It was strangely cut. Repaired decoratively with bile-dyed gut, it folded on itself around the neck and partly down the front. Small slashes had been made at regular intervals all along one edge. Flat rectangular bags were attached high up on the front, one on each side. Orbof slid two ceremonial sticks into each bag. Numer had never been this close to the robe and fabled sticks before. Such unknown colors, and the sticks seemed to hover in place, not fall into the bags. Numer's father had not believed that the robe was of any worth, but for all its ludicrous appearance, it did make Numer wonder.

The high priest regarded his blurred reflection on an ungraven place in the temple wall. Numer could vaguely see himself there too.

Orbof turned and Numer pointed. "What do they do?"

"Do? They are the breasts of the givers of the gun and the well."

"And the sticks?"

"They have their purpose."

Numer made a sound in his throat like a rock crushing bone. "If you don't wear them at the Give Thanks, will the birthings end? The Cloud Mothers go barren? The planting gun be silent as a man who cannot seed?"

Orbof's face darkened to the hue of a dried fruit. The end of his beard turned up as he frowned. "Not today, son of your father."

The council, three uncles who looked like peeled fruits, nodded, and one stepped forward.

"It is your first Give Thanks, Mister Krez. Your father was always tense this day." A greasy smile spread across his face. "But rest yourself. You only have to chief First-feast Night tonight."

"Tense," Numer laughed. "Good word for sore as a stubbed toe. If you drank as my father did, you'd be tense. No, you'd probably be tossed below for theft. But thank you, Flamsin, for reminding me of my duties." He swiveled so that he faced the altar, and smashed the heel of his hand against one of five great levers. It didn't budge. Someone squeaked, but there was no other response. Numer hid the pain he felt at the bruise that was already forming and turned around.

"Prepare away, Orbof. Or should I make up the prayer this birthings? I know I've only been krez for a few monmoths, but I've learnt so much. Thank you, veryush who came before us, for—"

Flamsin's knees felt dizzy. Oh, he had heard of the veryush, from Numer telling Orbof. Flamsin, soft as a peeled fruit, had always protected himself by hiding and breathing very quietly. Flamsin knew of what the gun sometimes did. He always had known all the gossip in society up here, but now he also glimpsed, in snippets of secret conversations between Orbof and the young krez, the frightening world of those Below. And Flamsin mixed what he had learnt. He knew now, though it was never said, that the gun, as old as eternity (and getting to be useless as an old man) acted shamefully. Last seeding, maybe it wasn't just his imagination, since it was rumored widely that the gun performed less, in frequency and output, despite Orbof's appeal to be sensible and remember—the days of seeding depend on the Cloud Mothers who must nurture the seeds after the seeding, and if they do not nurture, the birthings are small and shriveled. Flamsin dreamed of shriveled birthings falling, of waking up Below as a gatherer, fighting beetles on the slippery sand, of being hit by a seeding and dying a veryush. Dreams of the gun firing air, with nothing in it, of himself firing air. Flamsin had dreams most often of all, of the well going dry as a stone. There were whispers that it would happen in his lifetime, and only his waking hours made him think that no, he should sleep well, live happy. The dry well would come, but not till the time of, maybe, the children of his children's children. Of that he hoped, as he hoped that Orbof outlived him. The prospect of life under Orixibof made Flamsin feel unaccountably cold. Orbof had started the temple procedures in a curiously offhand manner, saying that he'd sent both his priest understudies out on duties. Maybe he has, Flamsin thought, and was glad the boy who thought he was a man and more than that, ready to be bof and possibly Numer, too—Flamsin was glad he was not here, nor his dissolute younger brother.

Orbof reached out to Numer with his staff. "Flamsin is right, Numer. Your blasphemy could change our fortune into fate."

Numer grabbed the knurled end of the staff and jerked forward, almost falling out of his seat. Orbof's arm extended. The high priest flicked his other hand at the men. "Leave us. Take your positions."

The councilors left so quickly that the clang of the heavy door echoed in the chamber. Outside the temple, they turned to each other and clasped hands. "May the Cloud Mothers be fruitful this season, their births splitting their sides." At every other year, this would be a time for a ribald joke. This year they said nothing, avoided the others' eyes as each walked to his position on the cliff, to watch as he had every year he'd been a councilor—watch the gatherers and carriers below, tiny and industrious.

Orbof jerked his staff out of Numer's hands. "I told you to get strong. And this is what you show me? You couldn't break a rope of baby's drool."

Numer's skin mottled over his cheekbones. "I shouldn't have challenged you."

"I shouldn't have coddled you as a child," Orbof said, not unkindly. "These sticks do nothing. I can tell you that now."

"I shouldn't have shown my fear."

"You showed your temper. No different to your father."

"But I feel different!"

"I know. But it is better, until we decide what to do, to act as your father to everyone here."

"Forgive me, Orbof."

"Forgive my advice that I must give, son of your mother. I am sorry you never found her."

Three bangs on the temple door resounded in the chamber. And from outside: "For the temple, high priest, the first birthings. Here for your blessing."

"Blessed be the Cloud Mothers!" Orbof called. And to Numer, "We both have our duties, Mister Krez. When will you wish to talk after Firstfeast? In three days?"

"As soon as they are drunk."

Orbof dropped his staff. "I am sorry I didn't confide in you."

"Begin tonight," said Numer. "Now open the door."

- 4 -

The "up" ladders were stiff with carriers, each burdened with a full load of birthings. Each carrier dumped this first-day's load in front of the temple, as the custom was. Behind and across the broken rock pavement stood the walls that surrounded Arret. From some doorway unseen, the Abovers wandered out, gathering by the temple to chat, wager, and watch the birthings mound. No gatherer could see more of the Above than Arret's front wall, cracked as it was. They were not allowed beyond the designated areas they were dutied to service: the temple offerings site and the tanks behind it, those great round structures the same age and artificial rock as the temple and wall, and just as cracked—but in the case of the silos, repaired once a year by a team of glue-makers with special passes to come Above for the job.

Tomorrow the work of moving the offerings from the temple mounds into the silos would take place, and after that, all gatherings were to go directly to the silos. From that, after the great gathering had taken place, a measure of birthings was calculated (by the krez) to be given to the Belowers who came up the ladders this time, with empty bags. This would typically be in about half a monmoth, for after this time, the gatherers would find little by sifting their fingers through the sand, and though everyone knew that the riches that the beetles had carried to their world below must be vaster than the riches of the Abovers, this wealth was equally untouchable. Thus life was balanced and sustained, and half a monmoth is not so long to wait, especially for a gatherer and a carrier, who are working so hard that they have no time to calculate the days. The faster the birthings are gathered, the more are taken off the sand, away from the reach of the beetles. And the sooner the Belowers' allocation can be calculated, and the carriers can collect it, and the sooner the seeding can begin so that the Cloud Mothers would birth again with no time lost.

That first day of collection for Below was always momentous, because it was also the first day of the seeding. The Cloud Mothers would be fat and beautiful, golden and green, in perfect condition for their seedings.

But today Poulo's only thoughts were of how many loads he could take up on this first day of birthing, his first day as a carrier. He jogged faster than was wise, his back bent with pride. Like any foolish youngster, he ran without the fruitskin cap that he should have worn at this time of heavy birthings, the pain of the plummetering

grains and fruits hitting his head being something that he wished would leave marks that he could show his friends and younger brothers, but his unruly head of curls protected him. Jahno himself had given a little speech at dawn this morning to all the carriers, welcoming him to their brotherhood. Poulo thought of that as he jogged toward the ladder, his bag full, when he heard something through the down-pour. It wasn't the special whistle of a gatherer summoning him to pick up. A moan? No. But something unhappy, complaining, whining as only a male gatherer can. As Poulo ran, he noticed a pile of something on the sand, and heard more. A curse.

An arm rose from the pile and waved. It had to be waving at him, as there was no one else near. And now the pile shifted and from it, someone sat up weakly. Poulo was close enough now to make out the face. A man of the same age as Poulo. No, a boy. Anyway, someone not from Below. Roundfaced, with no hair. His mouth was open, and out of it came a curse. The arm that wasn't supporting his body rose, and with that arm he cursed again. Poulo had never seen anyone dressed like this, never seen a bald head on someone who wasn't a newborn baby or a woman sentenced to aloneness, or one of the olds. Poulo was close enough now to see the eyes. The eyes of a man.

Poulo lifted his knees and changed his trained jog into the fastest run he could manage. His toes flicked out huge scoops of sand. His muscle weight plus his full load, plus his impatience piled onto that, slowed him more than if he had kept to the measured pace he had trained so long for.

His fingers closed upon his palms. With each soggy bound forward, some grains spat out of the top of Poulo's new bag, out of what would be his first offering-load on his first climb up one of the carriers' ladders. The load was so heavy that a man not trained to be a carrier would not have been able to lift it, let alone jog, let alone climb a ladder, let alone run with his mouth clamped in fury. But Poulo so forgot all that—and his sacred burden, that his back was straight as a legbone—as fists flung outward, he took the last three bounds in a leap.

Bofiar's brain had spattered out of the break in his skull an hour ago, when his father flung him from the edge. But Orixibof was still very much alive, only his kneecap shattered, when Orbof snatched him up hand and foot and tossed him, too. As he fell he screamed but no one heard him over the sound of the birthings. His life didn't have time to flash before him—only regret and hate. And then he hit. But instead of death, he met the soft, fat body of his younger brother. Bofiar had, for the only time in his life, been useful. Orixibof only suffered a further broken arm and possibly a rib. Not that any of these things wouldn't kill him eventually, but not yet.

He was too weak to crawl, so at first he waved and yelled, but no one was near enough to see. When Poulo noticed him, only the strength of his emotions was keeping him from falling into unconsciousness. His eyes were wide when finally, this slow beast-man came close enough to be useful, even though he was a Belower. "Hurry, you piece of dung," Orixibof was saying when Poulo put on the final spurt of speed.

Poulo fell onto Orixibof, snapping the trainee-priest's collarbone under the club-like weight of Poulo's arm. Poulo rolled off, and that's when he saw that there was a body (another Abover?) under this Abover—for he surely wasn't anyone from Below.

The sound of the bone-break had put some sense back into Poulo, who took in the scene with a degree of horror. Sprayed all over the top boy's face and beyond were the grains from this, Poulo's first carried load, his first offering to the temple on this day of days.

He took off his bag and looked in. It was now only half full. Not only that, but he'd broken a strap. In front of him, this scrawny nothing of a boy finally had his eyes closed, and looked to be either dying or falling into that sleep that sometimes happens before death. Poulo's father had gone this way when his foot caught in the

ladder and he fell. He'd been carried back to the chamber and hot sand had been poured onto his chest but he never woke. The next day he stopped breathing.

"Shit eater." The words were soft and strangely accented, but Poulo heard them without straining. Orixibof's face was a twist of features—pain first, but scorn a close second.

Poulo's rage flared again.

Out on the sandscape, about a hundred carrier-steps from where Cheema had talked to the Cloud Mothers, the quiet, painfully joyous sounds of gathering were cut by a wail, and then another, and a bellowed other . . .

Poulo didn't hear them, and soon Orixibof would never hear again.

"Stop, Poulo!"

Jahno's breath came out in hoarse puffs. He'd only seen the last of Poulo's kicks. The ground by the two bodies was a confusion of red fruits, golden grains, and blood-clotted sand.

Poulo was shaking. He had never been a fighter, had never disgraced himself, and now he was ruined, and afraid, and not just for himself. There was nothing to say. He didn't even try.

Jahno put his hands on Poulo's shoulders. "You found them here?"

Poulo looked at the ground between them. "I have brought damn—"

"Hah! You have saved me the trouble."

"You know them?" Poulo's head snapped up, his mouth a scurry of incredulity, embarrassment, relief, and shame. "I broke—"

"I can see. I've got another job for you, if you can control yourself. . . ."

They used Poulo's basket as a scoop. In moments, they'd covered the bodies with the mess so that the spattered mound looked like a fresh veryush, a forbidding and repellent sight.

They retied the strap well enough so that he could wear it again. Then he ran.

"Don't run over yourself," Jahno yelled, smiling. He had been thinking as fast as he could, and jogging, when he saw Poulo. The boy was just what he'd needed. Poulo hadn't yet achieved the slogging gait of the carrier, nor the stoicism of an adult. His thighs shone as he ran.

Out on the sandscape, the fresh veryushi were being discovered by carriers, one by one.

By the time Jahno arrived at the ladders, a red and gold ridge of Cloud Mothers' birthings had been built by the carriers in the lee of the cliff. A group of carriers had gathered there, milling uncertainly in the sharp shadows.

Nowhere Above could they be seen. The ladders were stiff with men climbing down, some with baskets and some, with horny hands—the sweepers. Jahno spotted Poulo, last to descend. He met him where a handful of onlookers milled around at the base—their varied stances and body odors, smoked dung being the loudest—told how abnormal this day of days was—a day that some people could not work at all.

"Is that everyone?"

Poulo shook his head. "Two sweepers at the temple wouldn't. And—"

"That's just as well," said Skentus.

"Who?" said Jahno to Poulo.

"How should I know?" he shrugged.

"What!" said Jahno. "Do you know if they had faces?"

Poulo turned scarlet behind his cheek fuzz. "One of them was Yu," he said. Yu was his age.

"And was the other an old man?"

Poulo nodded.

"What does it matter?" asked Skentus. "All that matters is that nothing has been noticed."

"And it won't be," said Poulo, relieved. He hadn't thought of that. There was so much to think of, and to do. But the sweepers could vie for toughness with any of the hardest-living Belowers. They had the most work-hardened hands, feet used to meeting the sharpest rocks, and backs that could hold their weight, though as sweepers, they were always lean as sinew.

"If you are wrong, may the gun seed you," said Skentus.

"There will never be another veryush," said the Crooked One, arriving on the shoulders of a tanner.

"Are you cursing us?" hissed Arumen.

Skentus raised his hand. "Let Jahno tell you himself."

"No," Jahno said. "Listen to the kreza herself."

From her position on the tanner's shoulders, the Crooked One spoke. The tanner turned from right to left and back again as she talked, so that she could face everyone in the crowd.

She told how she had known the well would run dry, and that the gun would grow weak. That was why the krez had thrown her down to the Below. Today, she said, Jahno had learned firsthand that the time had come. What the future would be, she couldn't tell.

"But," she said, "the gun will only be powerful enough to make veryushi now, if it has enough strength for that."

Gun, Cheema thought. There is only one.

Arumen threw his hands up, both of them fists. "You forget the power of prayer, woman." He took a step forward till he was one step away from Jahno, almost breathing in his face. "Get those birthings to the temple!"

"Yes," came another voice from the crowd. "What will you condemn us to?"

"Possible starvation, eventually—" said the kreza.

Jahno faced the group head on. "I haven't said why we can't waste time. The oldest trainee priest told me to prepare you carriers and sweepers today. He wanted us to carry him, his brother, some girls, their belongings and all the fresh Cloud Mother birthings and drink we can carry for them, and leave in the middle of the night when all the rest of the Abovers are drunk."

"And his father, the bof?" asked the kreza.

Jahno shrugged.

She stared at him. "You didn't say this to me."

"I didn't think it mattered. Only that the gun was going to kill. And I told you that Orixibof said that it would be loud enough that even the Abovers would think it some sort of punishment and make them run inside and not notice anything else wrong. Yes. But that's too complicated to explain to everyone here. Why would he do it if the well isn't dry?"

"Maybe to be bof. Maybe not," she said.

Jahno sucked in his breath. "Should I have done something? Should I do something else?"

She shook her head uncertainly. "No. I judged poorly once, and lost myself. If I judge poorly now, all of you could—"

Arumen spat. "Lies and superstition. Now you're wasting time when we should be gathering, taking offerings to the temple. Trainee priests! Babies!"

"You haven't met the priests. I have," said Poulo, lightly brushing up against Arumen to pass him and stand beside Jahno. "The priests are weak as babies, yes, but—"

"Up there, everyone is," said a sweeper. "What does that matter?"

"The one that Poulo killed would be the next high priest," said Jahno.

Arumen wailed and punched Poulo in the stomach.

Poulo lunged for Arumen but missed. Another carrier—one with a bloody knee—had just swept his arm against Arumen's neck. Arumen fell sideways just as the carrier with the bloody knee caught Poulo. Their hard bare feet swept Arumen's arms out from under him as he was getting up. No one looked at him as he rose from his sprawl and stood, glaring but silent.

"Those young priests," said the carrier, smiling at Poulo. "One of them tripped me for the fun of it. I hope you killed *him*."

"They're both dead," said Jahno.

"And better for it," snapped the kreza. "The gatherers are waiting and you're talking like weavers in winter. Go!"

"You heard her," said Skentus, waving his arm—the dried-up stick of an ancient storyteller.

Jahno and Poulo climbed the ladders, each with a load of birthings. Poulo's basket was Arumen's, handed to Poulo by Jahno himself.

At the temple, each deposited the birthings. Poulo could hardly believe all that had happened. This would have been the proudest moment of his life. Well, it still was, as Jahno winked at him. High Priest Orbof came out of the temple just at that moment, and Jahno dropped his eyes respectfully. He led, and Poulo followed, to the ladders. There was no one near, as most of the Abovers found the sound of Cloud Mothers trying, and besides, everyone who might have found amusement watching the scurriers below was getting ready for Firstfeast (preparations included hours of cosmetic painting and wig curling), and they certainly didn't wish to be walking about when the place was teeming with Belowers like those animal/men, the sweepers.

Jahno and Poulo had the ladders to themselves as they descended. At the base of one the kreza waited, standing as well as the Crooked One could. Skentus stood by the other, looking more like the skeleton of a child than a man of flesh that if cut, would leak juicewet blood. On the ground between, Cheema had been busy.

Jahno smiled at Cheema, who raised her hands. He couldn't tell if she smiled back, as her face was properly obscured, but his heart pounded that she had been given the honor.

"Ammaghleka," she said, still not knowing what it meant. "There is more," she said, hoping with all her heart. She held a carved stone bowl, which held embers. The kreza, and then Skentus, lit their wads, and touched them to the ladders. . . .

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The gun boomed soon after, but this time everyone stayed clear of the open space, only going out when the sound died down and the Cloud Mothers began to give birth. Then gathering and carrying resumed, only to be stopped, and all the people gathered and carried to safety before the next blast. The day continued this way with no one trusting the gun not to make more veryushi or stop altogether, but the blasts sounded like they always had.

All across the sandscape, carriers gathered the birthings from the gatherers. New places had to be found for this harvest, not to hide it from the Abovers but to store it. Only when new places were found and piled with birthings was the astounding fertility of the Cloud Mothers finally believed by the many workers at other trades who stopped their work to gape, or to help make room for more birthings. As the day

progressed, all other work stopped unless it had to do with birthings—the gathering, carrying, and storing of them. Everyone else was busy asking questions, arguing, marveling, theorizing, crying, laughing, hoping, cursing, singing, and in the case of a few sneaks (the foolish, selfish, and unsuperstitious) eating what they never had—fresh fat birthings.

Barefoot as usual, but wearing his fragile sacred robe, its chest pockets filled with those sacred sticks the purpose of which he hadn't ever explained to Numer's satisfaction, Orbof emerged from the temple while another blast from the gun echoed. The sun over Arret drew sharp, black shadows into the eye-paining white glare made even more painful because the brilliant light was mixed with the finest dust, which added to the glitter.

Only years of discipline had prepared him to spend this precious time droning prayers and making his body perform the high priest functions—all the while trying to think of what to actually *do*.

When he told Numer to meet him tonight, he had sounded full of confidence, ready to carry out plans that he'd had years to compose. But his thoughts were so muddled. He had always thought to escape to the mountains. But what if, living on that jagged ridge in the unknown distance, were people who wouldn't recognize him and Numer as the high priest and the krez of not only Arret, but all he could see? What if that jagged ridge that had always had so many rumors spread about it were part of a rim, the only part Arreters could see? What if he and Numer were regarded then as Belowers? What if there was no gun there? No Cloud Mothers to birth into a dish? Should he and Numer instead go Below?

Orbof almost laughed, he was so frustrated with his indecision. He had toughened himself, made himself an object of disgust to his boys, a shitfucker they called him, for *something*. Since the krez had convinced him so long ago, he had half-expected that, suddenly or come the end of a season, the Cloud Mothers would be condemned as unfruitful. At first, everyone would be angry at them, but soon, not able to vent anger at the Cloud Mothers, the priests would be the ones to blame. After all, the priesthood had always had this special relationship with them, or what was the use of the priests? And the chief blamer would be, Orbof reckoned, the krez, even this Numer 6. It was only a question of survival.

Orbof had once hoped that his sons would be of help. Now he could only hope that Orixibof hadn't made Jahno want to kill him, as not only the priest who taught Orixibof, but the father who spawned him.

He stood on the top step, blinking. The square in front of the temple should have been busy with carriers adding their offerings to the mountains they had built there since morning. Instead, there were a few piles and . . . he ran down the temple steps . . . two sweepers squatting by the temple wall. They jumped up when they saw him.

"Don't struggle," said one, as he grabbed Orbof and shoved him into a shadow.

"Your sister ordered us to protect you," he said, as Jahno had told them to say. "Let me wrap you in this dirtmat and carry you over my shoulder till we get out of sight." He unrolled a large pressed-fruit mat that the sweepers used to pile rubbish on.

"My sister?"

"The Crooked One."

Orbof could hardly believe it, but this was no time to question. Trembling with haste and too many emotions, he stripped off his priest's garb. He leaned down and dusted himself with dirt. When he faced the sweepers, he suddenly looked like one of them, down to his lean, brown, hardened feet.

The sweepers turned to go, but Orbof caught the arm of the nearest. "Not yet. The krez."

"This is hard enough," mumbled the other. "The Crooked One said to get you if the well ever . . . Is it the well?"

"The krez," Orbof insisted.

"No one else."

"His father's balls!"

"He can't help being the krez, but he wants to be one of you. He's been Below."

They had turned to each other before Orbof had finished. "I told you this man who is a boy was moldy," the younger one said to the other, not saying what they both thought so obvious that it only made it worse, more terrified if they admitted it—that the high priest had lost his mind.

"We should have left with the others," said the younger one.

His elder lightly cuffed him.

"He was looking for his mother's bones," said Orbof. "The krez is the Crooked One's son. He is not his father."

The high priest could have pushed them over with a breath.

"The krez will be at the palace," he said. "Take your mat for him. No time to waste."

The younger one had already turned to go when his elder held him back. "Two young flames, a fire makes. I'll go."

The palace was just across the square. It was the largest building in Arret, and in parts, still had three floors—though, suspended in open space, they only functioned now to give a sense of grandeur. Adding to the awe was the security of sorts—two decorative guards who usually stood at each side of the doorway. They'd gotten their jobs because of family connections, so were even fatter than most Abovers. They weren't anywhere to be seen, but their two deep voices could be heard egging each other on in a song with the refrain, "Lemme pour into yur mowv." Yes, they were in their cups already, leaping before Firstfeast into serious drinking.

The sweeper had never been in the palace, but soon found the krez in the only room with walls all round, and a ceiling. The sweeper had never been in a place like this. No curves, no carvings to the walls, only this space that made him feel trapped even though there was a soft curtain as a doorway. What a way to live!

The krez was standing beside what had to be a mattress. It was thick and made, of course, of piled fruitskin mats. But the sweeper couldn't help but raise his lip in disgust. If the krez didn't sleep well clear of the ground where the beetles walk, then no one up in Arret would. The Abovers and all their airs!

As for the krez—the sweeper coughed. He couldn't leave without possibly alerting the krez and making him unnecessarily suspicious. Yet the krez was naked. And he looked as weak and pale as a grub.

Numer whirled around. When he saw that it was only a sweeper, he exhaled in relief that no one important had seen him like this, and frowned.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, then flushed. Habit died hard.

"The bof sent for you," said the sweeper, his expression bland. "We'd leave now but you are so—"

"Everyone who isn't already drunk is putting on makeup or primping. But I've got this." Numer pulled a rough cloth and a carrier's basket from under a pile of krez hats. He wrapped the cloth around him and between his legs, and put his arms through the basket's straps. Then he clenched his hands and slightly hunched.

The sweeper whistled. In the fleeting glance any Abover would be likely to bestow upon someone with that profile, the krez would pass.

"Let's go," said Numer, already missing good soft cloth and nothing but air between his legs. This hurt. How they could work in it—

"You forgot your shoes."

Numer turned his back to the sweeper and bent his knee so that his sole faced up.

"Your mother would be proud," said the grizzled man.

Numer didn't know whether to be pleased or outraged by the familiarity. How could this sweeper know about so much about Above, let alone intimacies about the royal family?

The sweeper, old enough to have been the last krez, refrained from smiling. *This boy is perhaps not as useless as he should be.*

"Come," he said, setting off at a jog. "My name is Simon'n."

He was in front of the krez, so he didn't see Numer's eyes narrow. *What does it matter, Numer thought, what a sweeper's name is? And what kind of a name is . . .* already Numer couldn't recall the ridiculous thing.

Numer shifted his shoulders under the empty basket, but the straps still rubbed him as he kept pace beside the sweeper. He couldn't see anyone walking about, let alone watching, but the air carried faint tinkles and shouts. Firstfeast had begun. The Firstfeast ground faced a blue ridge of mountains, and was as far as could be from both the gun and the place Abover children had nightmares about—where the Belowers who came up here like the deformed sweepers crawled down to at night.

Traditionally, the krez appeared about midnight, when the revelers were besodden and sentimental. Drunk on potent Firstfeast wine and lusty from all that beauty preparation (every man and woman thinking that this night, no one could resist them), they saw their krez through a romantic haze of history. As he walked in roaring, they would answer "Our leader! Numer Numer Numer!" All the flushed faces turned to him heightened the feeling of the moment, as he played off them, and they each puffed up larger at the spectacle of fullness, wealth, historical imperative fulfilled. *Think what we're capable of. Look at what we have achieved!*

Numer 5 was remembered already as the best Firstfeast leader in history. He would walk in roaring, a personal guard at each elbow. Once guided to his throne, the special Firstfeast one, he would be seated, turn his head to the right and vomit hugely, enough to overfill a great bowl with purple froth. Then he would be clapped to retch to a rhythm, to wild cheers. After he was cleaned up, the Boggery Contest would begin, which he judged. The winners would get a pot of face paint, a pot of hair paste, a whole barrel of drink—and most popular of all, a wink from him which produced the loudest cheer, the dirtiest, most juicy jokes.

There had not been much betting about whether Numer 6 would follow in his father's footsteps at Firstfeast. Despite Bofiar having told his holwo-playing friends that this krez was as lively as a piece of dung, and thus worthy of them putting up the money for him so that he could bet and they could share some of his profits, most people thought that Numer 6 would exceed Numer 5 in celebrated grossness. After all, this krez was the perfect age—just old enough to appreciate the good things, but too young to pay. And as for the Argy, wink wink, everyone expected that this krez would, for a change, be capable of handling the Argy even if he couldn't stand upright.

The real lively betting was over which girl would have the luck. This year, the paints and hair glues were still being applied with extra care, for this new krez was still lacking a kreza. Some women warned against any girl wanting to be a kreza, only to be drowned out by girls who said cruel things like, "With your sweeper's body . . ."

"I didn't know Abovers could run," said Simon'n, as Orbof and the other sweeper came into sight, almost at the gun house.

Numer laughed. "Want me to race you?"

"Hurry," called Orbof. "The gun." He pointed to the Cloud Mothers.

Numer increased his speed, a little cruelly. He got to Orbof first. "This is sooner than—"

"Later," said Orbof.

Simon'n caught up, surprising Numer at the old man's speed and stamina. "Take that basket off," the old sweeper said, straining Numer's arms as he pulled it off while Numer was opening his mouth to ask why. Simon'n tossed it out over the edge.

"Let's go," said the other sweeper, a young man, taking the lead. Orbof followed him. Numer ran behind them feeling somewhat miffed that Orbof and a sweeper were in front of him. Simon'n watched over Numer from behind as they raced along the rim of the dish.

"Are we far enough?" said the one in the lead, turning to the high priest.

"Not—"

He was cut off by a deafening blast.

Orbof leapt forward, his head butting the young sweeper's chest. The sweeper stumbled, barely catching himself when a piece of the gun house punched his shoulder, and flipped away. His eyelids flared till his eyeballs looked as if they would pop out as his other hand reached up and clutched the raw meat of him, his fingers stabbed by his own bones. He stubbed his hard big toe and spun dangerously close to the edge, reeled drunkenly, and was gone, perhaps silently, but that was impossible to know with Orbof's keening cry exploding, then the slapping of the high priest's outstretched hands against his hard bald head.

Numer had been shielded by the sweeper's body, so he was only tossed up and flung down, his right arm and leg sticking out over the abyss. Shaking, he slid away, rolled, and scuttled, his knees catching in the sweeper's cloth he'd wrapped around his loins, till he ripped it off.

As Orbof slapped himself blindly and streamed out very unpriestly-sounding burlings, and Numer sat slumped naked, looking down at nothing, Simon'n looked over the edge. He found the rough rectangle of dirtmat, caught on a splinter of what might have been the gun. He swallowed a cry and a curse. Carefully, he leaned out and unhooked the dusty dirtmat from the splinter that had saved *it*. You live, you suffer, you die.

Saved! A dirtmat, and me! He felt as if his own heart had been torn in two. "Yu!" he mouthed. There was no time for more, not now. Yu, now blasted into nothingness, had been his son.

The sun was now hidden below the mountain ridge, but a V pared one white ray till it was an infinitely sharp blade stretching all the way to the naked shard of metal—for a moment, the tip glowed like a star.

Simon'n rolled up the dirtmat and then walked over and picked up the loincloth that Numer had torn into almost two pieces. He leaned down, helped Numer to stand, and wrapped the cloth around him as if the Krez 6 had been his own boy. Numer looked up and flexed his legs. *Ah!* he thought. *This is how it should feel.*

The sweeper stepped back and waited. Numer looked down at the old man, and was overcome with a sense of nausea from disgust. No wonder everyone said these Belower men were subs, that when one of them dies, the others walk over him as if he was a stone. This man just lost a workmate and he doesn't decently burst into tears, let alone tear his hair out. It's probably true too that at their feasts, they eat their children.

The sweeper's eyes responded with no expression. It took all his strength to hide his first reaction. And what he wanted to scream: "Why did Jahno tell us to save this beetle!"

Orbof was now moaning and rocking back and forth.

Numer noticed him, and his blood chilled.

Every time Orbof pitched forward, a strange clacking came from the area of his heart. In the big flat pocket of the high priest's irreplaceable robe, sacred sticks must have come loose. Their clips must have broken—the pocket jerked when he rocked as if something in it were struggling to live. As for that vestment, it was no longer

the priestly color of eyeball white, but of dust mixed with sweat, spattered with blood and something thicker. The decorative bile-dyed gut that had kept the sleeves attached now stood out as loops around his shoulders, the precious rags slipping around Orbof's wrists.

The sweeper clucked his tongue, dropped the dirtmat, shook Orbof's shoulder and had a word in the high priest's ear. Then he jumped off the edge, landing on a small ridge a man's height below. He crawled into what must have been a cave and reappeared shortly after with a roll of rope that he tossed up, and up again and again until Orbof finally caught and tied it around the base of a boulder that was still in position, perched on the edge of the cliff.

Beyond his grief, anger, and disgust, Simon'n would have been too terrified to think, but for Orbof. The high priest, it was clear to see, was communicating with the Cloud Mothers even while he tied the rope. From pain comes joy.

Numer stood beside the boulder, aloof. *I'm stuck here now at the end of everything*, he thought, *with a sweeper—a lowlife's lowlife—who has no feelings and is maybe an idiot, and an old failed priest who has lost his mind. Will we be murdered by a mob or each other, or die wandering? Or*, he suddenly remembered in panic, *of starvation?*

But he was too young to believe that. The gun had missed him, and the sun was warm, its touch soft on his skin. *That woman. The one below who throws her hair back in my dreams.* He suddenly knew that without her, his future . . . he'd rather be a veryush if he couldn't be with her. He had to get Below. He looked at the sweeper who stood there holding nothing but a useless dirtmat.

"You go first," said Simon'n to Numer, watching blandly to make sure the young krez was capable of gripping the rope. As the krez passed him, descending clumsily but surely, the old man couldn't help himself. "Such a useless mouth to feed. What can we do with him but apprentice him to a dung-dryer?" His words sounded like sand between the teeth.

From the sand below, "Jump!" Jahno yelled up to the krez. "I'll catch you."

The Crooked One led Cheema to the furthest recess of her home. "Now, daughter," she said. "You have much to learn, and teach." ○

Grain of Truth



Usually they come in waves
v-shaped gray meal moths
from the walk-in cupboard
two at a time or three
pumping up their wings
fluttering in the kitchen dark
occasionally I crush larvae
little yellow sandworms
without a dune to hide in but
I haven't seen either for months
somewhere at the way back
in that ten-pound bag
of forgotten sushi rice
Mothra's love child waits

—Robert Frazier

WILLING FLESH

Jay O'Connell

"Willing Flesh" emerged out of the author's perfectly ordinary midlife struggle with weight, body image, and identity. "I don't know a single person my age who doesn't daydream about the body they might have if they actually enjoyed exercise; this fantasy transcends weight, health, or vanity. What kind of people could we be, if we made ourselves do *all the things* we think we ought to? What would we win? What might we lose? I remain as ever, delighted to be sharing my stories with the readers of *Asimov's* and *F&SF*, and recently, *Interzone*. If you'd like to comment on this or any of my tales, feel free to stop by www.jayoconnell.com and share your thoughts. Talking with readers never gets old."

Lisa had been gone for over a month and still Garrison couldn't stand climbing into bed alone. Bathed in the glow of his 120-inch Andromeda Work-Play Station, he flicked through channels and ate saltines thickly smeared with peanut butter.

"Are you fat?" The buff man in purple spandex stared down from the screen at Garrison, making eye contact. "What are you, like two-seventy five? Three hundred pounds?"

The Andromeda's interaction icon, a pair of clasped hands, pulsed green. The question hung in the air as Garrison glanced down. His feet were invisible, occulted by the pale swell of his stomach. He picked a cracker crumb from his navel. Yes. He was fat. So?

"Take a good look at yourself. Do you like what you see?"

Garrison waved his hand to change the channel, but the Andromeda's subsidy countdown timer had appeared in the upper left hand corner; three minutes and counting.

"You hate exercise. You love eating."

Garrison gave a little nod.

"So do I." Spandex Man smiled. "But here I am." He placed his fists on his hips and thrust out his chest, flexing his pectorals hypnotically. "This was me six months ago." Spandex man was replaced with phone-quality video of an obese man standing slump-shouldered in a dingy room.

"That poor bastard was me," Spandex Man said, "before Fat Burner."

Garrison squinted. Yes, the facial features were similar, although the before-fat man wasn't smiling. Before pictures never smiled.

"Diets don't work," Garrison said.

Spandex Man nodded, and after the briefest imaginable pause continued, "Of course they don't! There is no way to lose weight and keep it off without exercise and calorie control. That's a fact."

Garrison nodded again. The subsidy countdown approached zero. He raised his hand.

"But what if someone else could exercise for you?"

The scene cut to the fat man doing jumping jacks, then sit-ups, straining to fold his massive belly in two, his face a mask of resolve. He almost looked like a different person while moving; more focused, more alive.

"That looks exhausting!" Spandex Man said. "These shots always give me a thrill, because even though that's my body, it's not really me. I can't remember a single sit-up! Tried one once. Bored me to tears! That's not me. That's Fat Burner."

Garrison watched the rest of the program in a daze; a peanut butter laden saltine perched on the recliner's armrest. Fat Burner was a personality implant. There were animated computer graphics of the brain, sliced away to reveal different structures highlighted in brilliant colors.

With his outstretched palm, Garrison paused the video and used the button on his armrest to return the recliner to a seated position. He hauled himself to his feet and walked to the bathroom, where he stared at himself in the full-length mirror. Then he found his high-school yearbook in the bookcase in the living room and flipped to a picture of himself, tall and lean in the group photo for the model U.N. club.

His high school had represented Vietnam at a mock U.N. conference in Manhattan when he was seventeen. He'd led the delegation and written a resolution that had passed in the General Assembly. His classmates had carried him to the bus on their shoulders, cheering. It was the last thing he could recall feeling proud of. Something he'd done as a young, skinny boy.

He walked back to his Andromeda and swiped his credit card through the home purchase reader. He paid the extra five dollars for two-day shipping.

The following day he received an email that his Fat Burner order had been intercepted by the U.S. postmaster. The treatment hadn't been approved by the FDA and a short-term exemption had expired, but the product was available to U.S. citizens via the Experimental Drug Program, with a physician's written approval.

Garrison called his doctor, a relentlessly cheerful red-haired young woman, who flatly refused to sign the waiver.

"I hope this thing is snake-oil," she said. "Otherwise, they're inducing psychosis to treat obesity, which is a cure far worse than the disease."

"Come in and see me. We'll make an appointment with the dietician. Your health plan includes a health club membership. Let's try something a little less . . . fanciful, first. Okay?"

Garrison laughed and agreed it had been a stupid idea. He made an appointment with the doctor for the following week and spent the evening eating bacon n' chive aerosol goat cheese on woven-wheat crackers. As he ate, he watched an endless stream of police procedurals into the early morning hours.

The detective was a scowling Anglo in platform shoes with a giant jet-black pompadour and a subtle shade of eyeshadow. All the villains were Asian, as was his assistant. When Garrison ran out of cheese, he switched to peanut butter.

The spray cans didn't hold all that much.

While waiting for Lisa to arrive, Garrison fidgeted on the tiny wooden stool at the cafe. She was already fifteen minutes late. He sipped his cappuccino.

Fashionable men and women chattered at the tables surrounding him. They looked half-starved to Garrison as he eyed the pastries behind the counter. He almost bought one, before realizing what a mistake that would be.

Lisa pushed through the door with a shopping bag tucked under one arm. She wore a skintight pink jogging outfit.

They said hello like old—but not especially close—friends, and as they did her eyes flicked down to his stomach, and back up to his face. Her motion tracker glowed on her left hip. A quick glance revealed she'd walked four miles that day, and jogged three.

"How's the wrist?" asked Garrison.

"Oh, it's all right." Lisa held up her left arm, which was still encased in salmon colored fiberglass. "I should have this off by the end of next week."

Garrison nodded. He'd broken it by rolling over in his sleep. She'd left him later that week.

"Look, it isn't about the arm. It isn't about your weight." Lisa stared at a dark vein in the marble table. "It's everything. We're not right for each other. We have nothing in common. We don't like doing the same things."

Garrison nodded, not believing her. It *was* how he looked, how he held himself, how his weight affected what he liked doing. When they'd met, they'd weighed the same, give or take a pound, but they'd moved in opposite directions for the last five years.

"I'm going on a diet. Rigorous. With exercise."

"That's nice, Gar. I think you should. For yourself." She held out a small yellow envelope. As he took it, he realized she no longer wore their engagement ring.

"You'll be amazed," she said, "how much better exercise makes you feel." She got up. "But I have to run."

"Literally," Garrison said.

She smiled and touched him briefly on the shoulder. "Goodbye, Gar."

Then he was alone.

That evening, Garrison consoled himself with a bowl of steaming Pho and shrimp toast at a Vietnamese place that he and Lisa had loved, and then ate a giant bowl of gourmet ice cream from the place around the corner, salty caramel with hot fudge.

When he got home, he reordered Fat Burner through a Blacknet server in the Cayman islands. This time he paid an additional twenty-five dollars for overnight delivery.

The Fat Burner box contained six one-month bottles of yellow pills with complicated looking lids, a four-color pamphlet, and a glossy card embossed with his user ID and password.

Garrison put on a pair of Bermuda shorts he'd bought for the vacation they'd never gone on to the Bahamas. He spoke the password into the Andromeda and waited while the program buffered. He skipped the disclaimers and digitally signed the waiver, scrawling his name in the air with his fingertip.

Spandex Man beamed down at him.

"You've done it!" he crowed. "A slimmer, stronger, healthier you is just around the corner!" The screen zoomed in and out to another room, where a skinny bald man introduced simply as "the doctor" replaced Spandex Man. His eyes were painfully blue, and his skin seemed to hang limply, as if he'd once been bigger, too.

The doctor reeled through a list of possible side effects, his upbeat delivery completely at odds with the horrific list of potential adverse reactions, before giving Garrison an unlock code. Garrison tapped it into the lid of the plastic vial with a pencil point.

"Please take one yellow pill and place it beneath your tongue."

Garrison did so.

"The inducer will dissolve quickly. While it does, I will ask you a series of questions and you will answer. At some point you will go into a trance. You will not remember any of the questions. You will exercise vigorously for an hour. You will not remember the session." The doctor laughed. "That's the whole idea."

"Please select a trigger-phrase for invoking your Fat Burner personality," the doctor said. "It should not be a commonly used word or phrase."

Garrison drew a blank, glancing about the living room helplessly, his eyes alighting finally on a vacation photo taken two years before in the Grecian isles. A considerably lighter version of himself reclined on the beach chair next to Lisa in a bikini and a huge sun hat.

"Achilles," Garrison said, the first Greek hero that popped into his head.

"Achilles," the doctor repeated.

Garrison nodded, noticing that it had become difficult to turn his head. He thought about blinking, but then realized he didn't really need to. The doctor asked him questions, many questions. He remembered none of them.

Garrison came to gasping in the shower, cool water splashing his face and flushed body. He fumbled for the tap and shut it off, shivering violently. He was exhausted.

Stepping from the tub, he picked up his shorts and T-shirt, both drenched in sweat. Grimacing, he tossed them into the hamper.

He stretched, exposing the tightness in his back and shoulders. His legs, arms, and torso also ached. His hands and feet were still flushed pink, tingling. What the hell had he been doing? Isometric exercises, supposedly. Whatever they were.

Fat Burner seemed to work. According to the on-screen doctor, his personality implant would take hold after a couple of sessions. Garrison stepped gingerly onto the dusty bathroom scale next to the toilet, leaning forward to catch a glimpse of the red LED display around his protruding stomach. He shuddered. He was either two hundred and fifty pounds or he had exceeded the scale's limit.

How much weight would he have to lose before Lisa would take him back?

Over time Garrison noticed Achilles taking up more and more of his evenings. He'd come home from work, take off his clothes, and sit in front of the Andromeda and then order Chinese, or pizza. An hour or so after eating, he'd stand up, rub his hands together, and say the magic word.

Without any effort beyond taking over-the-counter painkillers for the soreness, he'd lost twenty pounds in a month. Garrison was slowly changing shape; his upper body—chest, back, and arms—had begun to swell as his lower body slimmed. Three weeks into the program he realized that he needed to buy new clothing. One day he looked down after his shower and was shocked to see his feet. He wiggled his toes experimentally. Even they felt stronger, leaner.

Within six weeks, he was using the tightest notch on his belt.

But the amount of time Achilles consumed grew as Garrison's waistline shrank. At first it was only an hour. Then it was an hour and a half, then two. After six months, a session could last four to six hours. He checked the website FAQ to find out how to shorten the workouts.

He found a notice that the FDA had shut BodyImage down in the continental U.S. What remained of the product had been bought by Eurozone, a company that had formerly disposed of Soviet era nerve gas and land mines. The Andromeda's attempts at automatic translation weren't useful. He tracked down an international number and called it.

"So, the sessions," he said. "They keep getting longer."

"You are getting stronger, yes? Thinner?"

"Yes, but I have other things to do." Garrison wondered, exactly, what he meant by that. Watch TV? "I can't spend half a day in a blackout."

"You could try reducing the number of sessions per week."

He'd done this, but it seemed to make the sessions longer when he started up again. He'd find himself in the shower at two or three in the morning and be a wreck the following day at work. "How do I get rid of the implant?"

"Implant duration varies from customer to customer, very much. Most times, reimplanting is necessary, monthly. Every month."

"I did one imprint six months ago."

The silence on the other end of the line stretched to the point where Garrison was afraid they'd been disconnected.

"Implant duration varies," she said again. "We are glad our product is working so well for you."

"Something else. The other day, I found protein powder in the fridge. I don't remember buying it. I live alone."

There was another long silence. When it became obvious she had nothing useful to say, Garrison thanked her and hung up.

He'd lost almost a hundred pounds in six months, fourteen inches around the waist. That was enough. If the weight started coming back he'd begin exercising again. Until then, he wouldn't invoke Achilles.

Sipping his decaf cappuccino, Garrison waited for Lisa to arrive, wiping the froth from his upper lip. He'd almost worried that she'd found someone else, but an awkward phone call to her mother had relieved him of that fear. Still, she was late again. Losing weight hadn't changed that.

She arrived in running shorts and a bright green tank top. Her neck was even skinnier than he'd remembered, with thick cord-like tendons that ran from her collarbones up to her chiseled jawline. She smiled as she saw him, exposing enormous white teeth.

"Gar!" She said, eyes going wide. "I can't believe it!"

Garrison smiled meekly. "I told you I was going to do it."

"You did!" She embraced him quickly, and then, as quickly, disengaged and took a seat. "You did. I didn't believe you."

Garrison nodded, rotating the engagement ring in his jacket pocket nervously.

"So, how is everything?" she asked.

"Fine. Really. Have you been getting my email?"

"Yes. I've read most of it."

Most? "Then you know why I've invited you here. To talk about us."

"Yes." She looked him up and down in frank amazement. "You know, I never really thought that you could change so much. You've surprised me. How did you do it?"

"Oh, I joined a gym. Stair machine. Nautilus. That sort of thing."

Lisa nodded, her smile ratcheting back a notch. "Oh. I'd hoped it was something, I don't know, a little more fun. Like biking. Or swimming. Or rollerblading."

"Oh," Garrison said. "I do those, too."

Lisa frowned. She'd always known when he lied, but didn't like to call him on it. "Well, I don't suppose it matters how. It's enough that you did it."

She touched his hand with cool, dry fingers.

Garrison wondered at the empty feeling yawning inside him. His throat ached. The ring was slick with sweat in his pocket.

"So what did you want to do this weekend? How about a bike trip out to the Cape? Or we could go to the rock gym. That would be fun."

Garrison felt dizzy. "Rock gym?"

"It's this enormous indoor rock face. You climb it. With safety ropes, of course. We take turns, belaying each other, holding the rope. Or we could go sailing. God, Garrison, I always wanted to take you sailing. We could rent a tandem bike! Wouldn't that be cute? My friends, Jan and Dave, they have one. We could go on trips together!"

Garrison took his hand from his pocket, empty. "Uh-huh."

"Or we could just jog around the Charles. That would be a fun day, don't you think?"

"Umm. You know, this weekend might not be that good for me." He got up. "Let me give you a call, okay?"

Garrison hadn't thought about it much, really, while trying to get her back. But there was no escaping that he had very little in common with Lisa. They no longer had any of the same interests. Hadn't she told him that six months ago?

Once home, he sighed as he stared at his transformed body in the full-length mirror, turning his head to one side and flexing his biceps in the classic body builder pose. The contracted muscles were really quite impressive, the size of cantaloupes. Not that he'd ever really wanted muscles the size of melons, but what the hell. After a while, they'd go away.

All he had to do was avoid the word "Achilles"—

—Garrison came to standing in a tiled shower stall, rubbing soap on a broad, dark-skinned back. He'd worked it up to quite a lather. Garrison stopped rubbing abruptly.

"What's wrong?" The lean, hard torso rotated. A pleasant-looking young man with closely cropped hair regarded him with raised eyebrows. He grinned. "You want I should wash your back?"

"No thank you," Garrison managed after a second. "I have to go."

He stumbled from the shower stall into the bathroom with the stranger's protests ringing in his ears. "That was one hell of a workout," he offered as Garrison struggled into his pants.

Hurrying out of the building, Garrison got his bearings from the skyline—he was downtown—and walked toward the nearest subway stop. It was strange. He had never thought of men that way—or had he? When he was younger, maybe? He felt unsettled. Unnerved. Disturbed. He wondered exactly what he'd done, what had happened between the two of them.

The most alarming thing was that Achilles had taken over without him *saying* the trigger. He'd only thought the name.

According to his mobile it was Monday. He'd lost the entire weekend. Garrison waited until he was home before looking up BodyImage Eurozone. Their web-presence had shrunk to a stub site with minimal contact information. He called the customer service line, listening to the phone menu for only a few seconds before interrupting: "Operator. Customer Support." Nothing happened. The list was repeated. There was no operator.

Garrison hurled his mobile at the hardwood floor, creating a small, briefly satisfying explosion of glass and circuitry.

When he'd calmed sufficiently enough to use his words he dictated a nasty message as an email on his Andromeda, and sent it to the tech support address.

The message bounced back with a mailbox overflow error attached.

Dr. Morrow, the psychiatrist his general practitioner had recommended, was tall and bearded, with square horn-rimmed glasses.

"You requested an emergency appointment," he said in a low-pitched, neutral voice. After a handshake the doctor had retreated behind his desk, where he sat comfortably, leaning back, arms folded.

Garrison stretched, making the leather sofa squeak, his movement made awkward by the bulk of his muscle. He'd lost some mobility in the last few months. "It's been an emergency for a while."

Even in street clothes, Garrison's appearance was alarming. His arms stuck out from his torso at forty-five degree angles. His bulging thighs rubbed together when

he walked. His work clothing, at this point, had to be custom tailored, cut down from the huge garments he bought at Big and Tall men's shops.

"Can you help me?"

"You seem to be experiencing a chemically induced DID, dissociative personality disorder. What we used to call multiple personality disorder. There's no consensus on how to treat DID, organic or induced." Morrow leaned forward on his desk, steepled his hands and drummed his fingertips together. "In most individuals these episodes self-extinguish."

"That's what BodyImage said."

"But in some cases the other identity becomes dominant." Dr. Morrow met his eyes. "Most often in people with a borderline personality disorder comorbidity."

"What's that? Borderline personality?"

Dr. Morrow looked uncomfortable. "I don't care much about diagnostic categories. You're not a category, you're a person."

"Give me some examples. Borderline personality things."

"Borderlines have anger issues and are given to irrational outbursts and tantrums. They have problems forming relationships. They tend to alternate between idealizing and devaluing significant others."

Garrison swallowed. "Doesn't everyone do that?"

"No," Dr. Morrow said. "Not really."

"My other personality is getting stronger," Garrison said.

Dr. Morrow nodded as he pulled a pad from his upper desk drawer. He wrote out prescriptions one by one, laying them across the front of his desk; a cocktail of antipsychotics and mood stabilizers, a drug to combat muscle spasms caused by the antipsychotic, another drug to deal with tissue drying caused by the muscle relaxant. There was nothing they could do about the rapid weight gain, or the hair loss, or the impotence caused by these drugs, however. Dr. Morrow said Garrison would have to ease into the first prescription gradually. A rare side effect, skin necrosis, could be lethal.

"You'll want to have someone give you a good going over after a few days, check your back for any patches of discolored skin."

"I live alone."

"Then make an appointment with your general practitioner."

"How rare is the skin thing?"

"One in a hundred," said Dr. Morrow. "Don't worry. If a rash develops, we'll try a different drug. If that doesn't work we'll keep trying. We don't understand DID very well. There are some who don't believe in the diagnosis at all."

"Do you believe in it?" Garrison asked.

As he looked Garrison up and down, Dr. Morrow's expression was apologetic. "I do now."

They shook hands again when the twenty minutes covered by the HMO were over. Garrison read through the data sheets on the prescriptions at the pharmacy, long lists of potential adverse reactions the doctor hadn't mentioned, before throwing all of it, the pills and the data sheets, into a trashcan in the parking lot.

Mr. Greenly, Garrison's manager, smiled thinly as he shook his hand. "Have a seat, Gar."

Garrison took a seat opposite him. He perched on it, rather, balancing his considerable bulk on the fragile looking ergonomic office chair that creaked ominously under his weight.

Greenly squinted at him. "Is that going to be all right, or should Carol bring in something else?"

"No." Garrison slumped, trying to look smaller. "This will be fine."

Opening the folder on his desk, Greenly cleared his throat and withdrew printouts of the three warning letters that Garrison had received over the last few months. "As a salesman, you realize that appearance is part of the sales process."

"Yes. I remember you suggesting I take off twenty or thirty pounds."

Greenly rubbed his forehead. "Yes. And for a while, we were very pleased. For a while. I'm afraid you've taken things too far. You're intimidating. We sell Enterprise Software, not barbells."

Garrison visualized punching Greenly in the face, his nose spraying blood. He struggled for control, claspings his hands together in his lap.

"But this isn't about appearances, it's about your unexcused absenteeism. Last week's notification was your final warning."

Garrison nodded, his eyes tightly closed. The Other One had been making off with whole days in the middle of the week. Every time he accidentally thought—

Garrison stepped from the shower and slipped into one of the fluffy terrycloth robes that Achilles must have purchased.

His apartment had been cleaned. Neat piles of towels and laundry were stacked on the living room sofa. Padding to the recliner, Garrison snapped the Andromeda to life. His message icon queue throbbed red, which meant someone on Garrison's very short VIP list had left him a message. He opened the file.

A muscular shirtless man stood in the room he was now standing in, the recliner pulled off to one side. It took Garrison a second to recognize himself; he'd been avoiding mirrors for a while. His cheekbones were more prominent now, his jawline more defined and cleanly shaven. Achilles had cut their hair to a quarter centimeter of blond fuzz and Garrison hadn't minded, though the feeling of it still shocked him. His head felt like a shoeshine brush. There was also something different about his eyes; something Garrison didn't see in the mirror.

"Hello, Garrison," Achilles said.

He spread his arms, palms out. "Mission accomplished," he said. "Now what?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I need a new goal. What do you want to be? What do you want to do? Write me a contract. Give me a plan. I'll make it happen. I'm not going anywhere. I enjoy being alive, being useful. But . . ." Achilles chewed his lower lip briefly, and Garrison suddenly saw himself in the other's face.

"You tell me what to do next."

The message ended. Garrison blanked the screen with a flick of thumb and forefinger.

He had to look for a new job. He hated looking for work—the notion of making Achilles find it for him was very, very appealing. To be honest, he didn't like being a salesman; he'd fallen into the career to escape from an even more unpleasant tech support job and found sales tolerable and better paying.

Achilles might be a great personal trainer, or he could continue in sales but work with fitness products. . . .

Garrison shook his head. What would he, the real him, do? Wake up in the evenings and watch a little TV? Play video games? Eat? He could outsource his entire life. Set an alarm, and awaken on his deathbed and look at a scrapbook; check his bank account and look at family photo albums. He shivered at the thought, which was simultaneously attractive and repulsive.

Instead, he searched online for alternative treatments for drug-induced multiple personality disorder.

He shot a brief message, before falling asleep, addressed it to Achilles and left it in his message queue. Garrison was unsure if Achilles shared his memories; he seemed to know his passwords and credit keys, but leaving the message felt official, somehow, the right thing to do.

"I want my life back," he said into the camera eye of the Andromeda. "It's my life. Maybe I'm screwing it up, but it's mine. Not yours. You're a mistake. A product malfunction. Leave me alone," he said.

"Don't come back."

Garrison stumbled, somersaulting down a flight of concrete steps. He reached a landing and lay panting and bruised on the cold slick pavement. Rain poured down from a slate gray sky above the deserted football stadium.

He'd been running the steps and the sudden downpour must have brought him out of it. He checked his watch. It was Sunday. Achilles had taken almost a week.

He shuffled to the subway like an old man, shivering in the cold rain as every muscle and tendon screamed agony. He was safe for a while. Fatigue seemed to lock out the keywords. He could think the name Achilles now. When he recovered, thinking it would trigger the change again. And again. And again.

Back in his apartment, Garrison noticed changes. Half the furnishings were gone, giving the space a clean, zen-like simplicity. The missing items were the Lisa purchases; she'd enjoyed chachkes, useless ornamentals: wicker baskets, wall hangings, ceramic pots filled with dried flowers.

A large print of a sensuous white lily in a vase had replaced the grid of photos of Lisa and her family (he had been in a few of the shots, generally off to one side).

Piles of neatly sorted bills and correspondence on his kitchen table showed that Achilles had tapped Garrison's 401k in order to pay rent, the rest of his bills, and zero out his credit cards, which didn't leave them much in the way of assets. In another six weeks he'd be flat broke.

The fridge was packed with fruit, vegetables, and vegan protein powder.

Garrison collapsed on the sofa, snapped his fingers to wake the Andromeda and flicked through the live channels.

In the ads, young svelte people were ludicrously happy to be drinking soft drinks, savoring chocolate or engulfing greasy hamburgers. They caressed sleek mobile phones and drove gleaming cars through otherworldly landscapes. They consumed a great deal of pharmaceutical products.

He watched part of a reality show in which morbidly obese men and women attempted to lose half their body weight in four months. Personal trainers that looked a lot like Garrison shouted encouragement and abuse at the sweating and struggling contestants, who eventually collapsed or vomited from stress and fatigue.

Former contestants in bathing suits were featured in bumper segments going into and out of commercial. A blonde woman, about forty, in a T-shirt and shorts laughed. "Being in this body is a dream come true," she said.

She embraced her trainer, weeping as they faded into an ad for a next generation antidepressant.

Garrison rummaged in his utility closet, finding the toolbox cleaned and organized. He hefted a hammer, which felt strangely light in his hand.

The Andromeda's screen shattered into a cubist nightmare with the first blow, but didn't go dark. Garrison smiled, swinging his arm in easy and satisfying arcs against the screen, tiny fragments of glass raining down on the bare hardwood floor.

Achilles wanted something to do? He could clean up the mess.

The psycho-surgeon's office was in the seediest part of Chinatown. Garrison made his way down the cratered alleyway skirting filthy pools of rainwater. His entire body hurt like hell, and he figured he had at least a couple of hours before Achilles manifested. Above the door, a brain rendered in cherry neon lit a small sign—three ideograms above the words BRAIN DOC. The waiting room was tiny, as

was the receptionist. She fixed him with a birdlike glance, before shouting something in Chinese.

The inner door opened admitting a tall, elderly gentleman dressed in a slightly frayed three-piece suit with a red silk tie.

He bowed his head in greeting. "BodyImage?" he said, in Midwestern accented English.

Garrison nodded.

"Come in. We'll see what we can do."

The brain doc's office was elegant, in a run down sort of way. The oriental carpet was worn but pleasant, an intricate pattern of interwoven ideograms in crimson and gold. Framed prints covered the walls, displaying shimmering holographic brain MRIs, as well as acupuncture, palmistry, and phrenology diagrams.

Garrison took a seat on the leather couch as the doctor retreated behind an enormous oak desk. Quickly, he narrated a condensed version of his struggle with Achilles.

"You have seen a psychiatrist?"

"That didn't work out."

"Not surprising. I could run tests." The brain doc looked him up and down. "I'm not optimistic. Achilles is, as Jung would say, your shadow."

Garrison grimaced. "Can't you get just rid of it? Cut it out?"

The brain doc laughed, an abrupt barking sound. "Sorry, I am not that kind of doctor. We will discuss what is possible after the tests."

The doc asked a series of absurdist questions while he waved a glowing wand protruding from his mobile phone around Garrison's head. What was the sound of one man napping? How much wood, could a woodchuck . . . chuck? If led to water, could he make a horse—think? Had he ever immersed anyone in tartar sauce? How much longer did he think Abraham Lincoln would remain dead?

Afterward they sat and waited for an ancient desktop computer to process the results. Garrison's brain appeared on screen, slowly rotating, surrounded by ideograms in a rainbow of colors.

"Achilles is irremovable, but not immutable," the doc said.

"What does that mean?"

"You know the phrase, 'thesis, antithesis, synthesis'?"

"Sort of. No. Not really."

"Light and darkness merge, rebalance."

"Would I still be me?"

The doc was silent for a moment, his eyes fixed on the computer display. "Tell me, what do you have to live for? What do you want to do with your life, in your heart of hearts?"

Garrison opened his mouth, licked his lips. "Um," he said.

"Take your time."

He'd wanted a life, a companion, a family, a nice house, a decent car. Comfort and stability, children and grandchildren, and holidays and vacations. None of those things felt important at the moment, even if he could blink them magically into existence.

"I don't know."

"That is your problem," the doc said. "Achilles has a goal. He is a goal personified. Achilles makes progress, but it is limited, one-dimensional. He is only half alive."

"Half alive?"

The doc shrugged. "Of course, most people are only half alive. At best, I can remove the barrier between you and Achilles, before you dissolve completely. You will reintegrate. The two of you will become one."

Garrison looked down at his hands. Achilles took excellent care of his nails, which were trimmed neatly, the cuticles pushed back. He clenched them and unclenched them, and let out a long shuddering breath.

"Let's do that," Garrison said.

The doc nodded and tapped a data pad on his desk to life. He scrolled through a list of documents and then handed the pad to Garrison.

"This release absolves me of all responsibility for your treatment. Sign with your fingertip."

"What's the worst that could happen?" Garrison asked as he skipped through the document to the signature box.

"Your heart could stop, killing you instantly," said the doc. "Very unlikely. One chance in a hundred."

Garrison laughed involuntarily. "Shouldn't this be signed in blood?" He scrawled his name with a finger held steady by sheer force of will.

"Hah," the doc said. "Humorous! I'm not your devil. You surprise me. This is a brave act." He met Garrison's gaze with compassion. "This is a good beginning."

Garrison wiped his face, trying to think of the last time he'd been called brave. He remembered being carried to the bus, in Manhattan, when he was seventeen years old, king of the U.N. club. The young man he'd been. The man he'd wanted to be but never gotten around to being. . . .

"Can we do this now?"

The doc nodded. "Now is the best time to do things. Generally speaking."

The athletic man who left the brain doc's office walked slowly, but with purpose, his eyes catching on the signs and shop windows of Chinatown. He inhaled the aroma of roasting pork, the sharp smell of silvery fish nestled in beds of ice in front of the market. Across from the fish were neat stacks of mangos, plantains, apples, and Asian pears individually wrapped in foam netting.

Achilles, he thought, for the fifth or sixth time since paying the brain doc's bill. Nothing happened—he was still himself, the one him, the new him, that remembered both people he had been.

Good.

A skinny gray animal slunk around the crates, leaping up on the stack of mangos to push his nose toward the fish, sending a half dozen of the red fruits bouncing to the pavement. Halfway between kitten and full-grown cat, the creature's large eyes were green and luminous; its left ear partly missing, squared off at the tip.

A short, scowling man shouted something in Chinese, rushing toward them waving his arms. The man who had been Garrison laid a hand on the shopkeeper's shoulder to calm him.

"Does this animal belong to anyone?" He asked. The cat was a living skeleton; you could count its ribs through its short gray fur. The shopkeeper shook his head, grimacing. Paying for a pear and a fish with a ten-dollar bill, the new man led the animal to a nearby bench.

"You'll need a name," he said. "So will I, come to think of it. A job, too."

The cat looked up. "Not for you. The job, I mean. Your job is to be a cat. You've got that down cold. Bravo."

The cat wasn't paying attention.

Garrison had not been without ambition, but he'd been afraid of work. He had hidden from life. Achilles was a doer, a stoic, capable of molding himself to purpose, but lacking any direction but the one for which he'd been constructed.

I'll need to go back to school, the new man thought without a hint of dread. He bit into the pear, which was crisp and sweet. He wasn't worried. The world was filled with work that needed doing.

He leaned back, smiling, and watched the cat. ○

Fran Wilde has worked as a science and engineering writer, sailing instructor, programmer, game developer, teacher, and jeweler's assistant. Her short stories and poems have been published in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *Asimov's*, *Tor.com*, and *Nature*, while her nonfiction interviews with writers have appeared under the banner "Cooking the Books" at *Strange Horizons*, the SFWA blog, *Tor.com*, and at *franwilde.wordpress.com*. Fran's first novel, *Updraft*, is forthcoming this fall from Tor, with two more to follow in 2016 and 2017. Her second story for *Asimov's* offers some haunting tips on . . .

HOW TO WALK THROUGH HISTORIC GRAVEYARDS IN THE POST-DIGITAL AGE

Fran Wilde

Officially, I don't see anything I'm not supposed to. That's in all the reports. That's what I tell myself each night when I sneak into St. Paul's cemetery like the local kids do. My eyes are still sensitive and weak from surgery, especially the right one. Even at night, light flickers at the edges of my vision, becoming open mouths, panicked hands, a fire-bright bird plummeting through a shattering roof. The ghost images appear and disappear, tainting what I'm supposed to see now: the cornfields, the wrought iron fence, the heron in St. Paul's bicentennial tree.

My data-surgeon, Ben, says, “Hang tight, Eleanor,” when he visits. He’s working on new filters, and his bosses and IARPA are pushing him to move fast. Soon I’ll see perfectly again.

On my rounds in the cemetery, I stumble on a loose brick and fall forward, landing hard on both hands. My jeans don’t tear on the age-soft path, but the scar tissue on my left knee aches as I fight to rise and keep walking. My palms sting where they aren’t numb. A wave of light passes slowly across my vision from left to right.

“An ocular disturbance,” Ben calls it. The light resolves into more faces I shouldn’t see. “Bugs in the interface.” Faces with names I no longer fully know. Colleagues. Friends. I watch them scream: James, Mej, Sara. See them sheltering children with their bodies as they die.

After the explosion at *el-Somewhere* (I no longer know the name), Ben scraped my eyes clean as best he could. He hooked me up to monitors, rerouted my neural feed, and dug around in my implants, past the filters, into the backs of my eyes, my brain. He rooted out places I’d been, asking, “Where were you?” and murmuring “Good,” each time I couldn’t answer his questions. My mind still tongues the gaps between details, searching for the stucco walls of the home Ben burned away; walls that once supported the roof that I can still see collapsing on my platoon.

At first, I’d felt a rush of relief when Ben pulled the data from me. I longed to forget more as he stripped surnames from soldiers I’d been embedded with, erased the days and hours we’d traveled together. He’d tweezed out each piece of classified information the explosion had seared past my implants’ experimental filters, onto my very human neurons. He did it as carefully as the battlefield surgeon had cut the ruins of my blue PRESS vest off me in the field, pulled shrapnel from my hands, set my leg, and doused my Wi-Fi connection before packing me in ice and sending me to Bethesda.

Officially, Ben got everything. IARPA rewarded his company with more time to fix my eyes before they dropped the contract.

Unofficially, there are shards of data Ben couldn’t remove. Worse, the explosion—Ben calls it the incident—corrupted the interface’s database. Ben’s team has been re-tagging classified items since I left the hospital: military fonts like OCR-Alpha, munitions, certain high-end computer screens. Sometimes these stay classified, sometimes they don’t. Ben said as much when he visited my hospital room, flanked by company lawyers. Beneath my bandages, my vision pulsed black and red. The ghosts of my friends mouthed his words: contracts, obligations, recovery. I shook at the thought of going home, but Ben took me anyway.

He let me keep the eyes. Promised the disturbances would fade, but I should report anything new, just in case.

Ghosts aren’t anything new, though. So, officially, I’m not reporting them anymore. Even local ones.

I pace the old churchyard’s red brick path, focusing on my footing. The four-hundred-year-old swamp chestnut oak rises a hundred feet high beside the fence, according to the bicentennial plaque. Its roots churn the ground; its branches filter the young moon. The dappled shadows here are all my wounded vision can tolerate.

I spot movement in a far corner plot, near Tallulah’s grave. See a screen-green glow. Kids, seeking their own haunts. I take the path in their direction. Two years ago, I couldn’t see a thing at that distance. Even with the buggy hardware, these eyes are better than the ones I was born with. I don’t want to lose them.

My left eye has less damage. The other eye still holds images that Ben and IARPA couldn’t strip: James, Sara, Mej. The roof that grew a hole of flame. The falling bird. Ben took my platoon’s unit number and anything that would reveal the incident’s location, but I’m guessing most families don’t know what really happened to their kids any more than I do. I can see it in my friends’ faces all the time, especially in that eye.

Because the right eye's more sensitive around the edges, Tallulah, former star of stage and screen, usually shows up at the corner of my left eye first, like she knows that won't startle me as much.

Tallulah always knew where a camera pointed in life. Apparently this is true in death too. She'll show in my left eye, smiling that half-smile from Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*. If she stands still long enough, the nearby gravestones filter through the pattern of her dress and dapple her skin with last names: *Beacon. Staunton.*

So far tonight, she's nowhere to be seen.

When Ben brought me home from the hospital, he left after an awkward minute of not meeting my father's eyes. Upstairs, my old room was too bright, even with the shades drawn and my news clippings and blue and gold Kent County pennants dark with shadows. So I lugged my gear down the back stairs and across the grass to the empty tack room in the barn. Windowless and stuffy from years of disuse, it had a light on a dimmer that I could dial all the way down. I messaged DO-NOT-DISTURB to Ben's company's servers, then took a pill one of the nurses had given me. The pill filled in all the empty spaces behind my eyes with more darkness, and I slept through dinner. Then I snuck out, past my dad waiting in the farmhouse kitchen, his fingers drumming a beat on a can of Natty Boh he wasn't drinking.

I stumbled through the cornstalks and past the old battlefield by my family's farm, all the way to St. Paul's cemetery, looking for quiet. It was, I recalled, one place where WiFi didn't reach. For the first time since I took the job and Ben installed the eyes and their WiFi implant, I was alone with my ghosts and what I could still remember.

St. Paul's churchyard is well off the main highway, down a gravel road that passes through the deep cover of summer corn and kudzu-draped telephone poles near my family's home. Caulk's Field, a War of 1812 skirmish site, is a stone's throw away, along one of the few lanes of tar-patched macadam that connects one small town to another on Maryland's Eastern Shore. In high school, the Frain twins and I went haunt-hunting all around here. Never saw a single spirit.

Now, weeks after I came home, I'd rather be at St. Paul's than with my father in his kitchen, his face filtered through the images of dead friends I'm not supposed to see.

When Ben came back out to the farmhouse last week to tweak the filters, my father ignored him and I kept quiet about St. Paul's. Ben's company had designed my eyes to see only what they're supposed to, and they needed to work for everyone to get paid.

When I'd signed on, Ben had promised me and my dad, "Best of both worlds. Huge improvement over the available augmented lenses." He sounded like a brochure. I liked that as much as I liked the idea of twenty-twenty vision, and Ben knew that. He'd spotted my thick glasses and journalism textbooks from across the quad on a campus recruitment visit. He'd called up the size of my Chesapeake College student loan, too. "Hiring full-time, not freelance. Experience in the field, with pay. See what few see."

My father hadn't been sure. "What if she sees too much over there?"

"The lenses let us keep classified info classified, and Eleanor can still do her job," Ben explained. He said IARPA loved the implants, which were stronger and easier to filter than the usual wearables. He offered a few shares on any profits, if the military picked up a full contract.

I'd signed fast, barely looking at my dad or reading the small print. *Rand, Eleanor.* One of few in my class with a job. Nineteen years old and a war correspondent, with the latest vision augmentation, courtesy of IARPA and Ben's company.

They fixed up my eyes with the latest extra-high-res implants and made me part of the information front line. My beat: slice-of-life stories. I would relay my platoon's personal side, nothing classified. Their humanitarian missions. How James dealt with stress (computer games, mostly an old one called Portal); the personal touches Mej put on her battle vest (a teddy bear patch, flags, and a pink ribbon for her mom).

The USO celebrities Sara had met (and the backup singer she'd kissed behind the bandstand).

The project fast-tracked when my first field tests came back: anything flagged as classified either blurred or disappeared altogether.

Until the explosion. Then I saw everything. The shattering roof. The terrified faces doubling, shifting, and the dead lifting away, passing right through me. I still see them. I see the dark gaps of what I no longer know, too. I close my eyes tight and wait until the images fade. *The filters are fixed*, I whisper. *Things work now*.

Officially, they do. I can't read military fonts again. I can't watch the latest blockbuster movies: modern tanks and guns vanish. Everything in order. Except for the ghosts—those details that had burned so deep, Ben couldn't dig them out without blinding me and killing the trial.

Unlike war zones, St. Paul's cemetery is a terrible place for trials and the information front line. Not many visitors, horrible WiFi. The dead zone in the churchyard lets me keep some things to myself. So here's where I come when it gets dark. Here's where I practice walking and trying to see, off the record.

When Tallulah doesn't show, I go looking for her, my pace slow. I favor my right leg since the explosion at *I-Wish-I-Could-Remember*. Ben won't tell me if the incident was friendly fire, and I can't find any reports on the news that might fit in one of my gaps, which means it definitely was.

Tonight, I follow the crumbling brick path through the burial sections toward Tallulah's grave, reading family markers: *Blondell*, *Stockton*, *Frain*. I glance over the poetry, the *Ad Astras*, *Dulces*, and the *Prepare to Follow Me's*. The 1812 and 1918 markers cast lengthening shadows, while the salt-white Confederate and Union stones look squat and pale in the moonlight. The boxwoods grow around older stones, sheltering them. The heron—often the only other living creature besides me in the churchyard—huddles bloody-eyed in the bicentennial swamp chestnut oak and stares hungrily at the silver-black pond down the hill.

It's beautiful at night; there's no one here I have to watch die. It's quiet too, without the WiFi.

Granted, if the signal *wasn't* so crap inside the fence, Tallulah would be long gone the first time she caught herself on one of the new cameras. Now that I've told her everything, she keeps trying. Especially on nights when local kids slip through the wrought iron fence like foxes, looking to get sweaty in the creepy dark, or to lie on the tombstones to try and hear someone sing. Tallulah likes those nights, but I don't.

I've dug for more fragments in my memory while talking through what I know with Tallulah. Looking for clues. Ben left me nothing else. The gaps aren't a relief any more; they only highlight the shards I have left. Somewhere on IARPA's servers, tagged classified, is whatever my lenses force-uploaded in a rush during the explosion, but I can't see it anymore. So much for intrepid reporting. I stumble again and catch myself. *Hang tight, Eleanor*.

I spot Tallulah before she sees me. She's sneaking up on the two kids—the owners of the green glow. They've brought a tablet to her slab.

I hear tinny voices playing from a speaker: the kids have downloaded a movie to try and conjure her or get her singing. Much like I did, long ago. But Tallulah hasn't complied and the kids have long grown bored. They're splayed across her grave and her sister's, the surname showing beneath them: *Bankhead*.

Tallulah's by the bicentennial tree, just waiting for them to start taking pictures of themselves, which kids always do. If she can't get on video, she's hoping stills will be good enough.

I should never have told her about Mej, Sara, and James. About their upload and what I think really happened. Now it's all she wants. Cameras. Networks. Once

Tallulah gets out, who knows what might follow. All she needs is one good shot, and I don't want to let her go.

The suits at IARPA have no idea what their optics can pick up. Ben doesn't either. "Too much data per pixel turns experience into electric pulses," Ben mumbles when he visits. "Too little control over the upload." Each visit, he takes my backup data patch, lays it on his fancy tablet, and fiddles with the settings, adjusting classified tags to control what I can and can't see. Once he classified the cornfield, filtering out anything tall, green, and a few inches in diameter. I stubbornly bumbled my way through it, blind, until I crashed into the churchyard's wrought iron fence. Sometimes Ben blocks certain colors. I haven't been able to see orange since he was here last.

He has no setting to filter out ghosts.

I watch Tallulah kneel so her face is level with the kids' heads. She can go so still, sitting like that. As expected, one teen lifts her tablet to take a photo of herself and her friend lying on the grave. I cough.

They jump.

Tallulah hasn't planned on the kids spooking.

But it's not her who scares them. I wasn't put back perfectly after the incident. I limp and stumble. My hair grows patchy at scar-lines. My eyes gained an extra ring around the corneas that looks bright red in the moonlight.

The kids go shrieking back over the fence, shirts billowing and catching on the twists in the wrought iron. I hear the loud sound of cotton ripping thread from seam.

They've dropped the tablet in the grass between the Bankhead sisters' gravestones.

By the time I pick it up and put my thumb on the camera, Tallulah's looming over my left shoulder, her profile sharp and close. The hair on my arms rises. Her mouth makes a shape that would sound like "tsk"; her skin's smooth as a twenty-year-old's, and she's decked herself out in a black plunge-neck dress and pearls the size of my knuckles, straight from one of her publicity shots. A cigarette dangles from her fingertips.

"Nasty habit," I say. I'm glad she's here with me as the kids' shrieks echo in my ears.

She looks at me mischievously from the corner of her eye. Taps the ghost-ash onto the tablet, where it disappears. "Nice dress," I add.

I know little about fashion, and am only now learning about black and white movies and history. Still, Tallulah preens at my comment. Her pale-as-night fingers brush her neckline. She holds out her hand for the tablet and pouts.

"No. Not for you." I look at what the kids downloaded. Sigh. "It's *Devil and the Deep*." I'd rather hike back to the tack room and get another movie, if she wants to watch something. I wait and hope. I'd downloaded a bunch of films and footage: *Lifeboat*, where she played the war correspondent; a newsreel of Tallulah booing that South Carolina Senator during Truman's inauguration parade; a few of her *Batman* appearances. We like to watch those. We aren't so big on *Devil and the Deep*'s jealous love triangle.

Tallulah shakes her head, sending her finger-wave hairdo into a wild nimbus. I laugh. Then she puts her hand through my arm.

That freezes me. I hit the panic switch Ben installed when he scraped my memory. My vision goes dim around the edges, then black everywhere. Only the ghost image of my friends stays, seared behind my eyes. I wait, breathless and cold in the dark, until Tallulah pulls her hand away. Then I slowly switch my neural gear back on, so I can see again. I feel myself breathe once, twice. Feel my heart pound. Tallulah's never tried to touch me before. She shouldn't be able to. Tallulah only appears in my cameras because of how high-res the lenses are. Because the hardware is buggy, not the rest of me.

The rest of me is off limits.

I want to hide inside the eighteenth-century church's red brick walls until the sun rises again, blinding me with light. But I have to report this. Ben will see my biodata the minute I step out of the graveyard. He'll wonder what I'm not telling him. So I force my feet to move up the path. Left, then right, until I'm past the heron and the bicentennial tree and through the gate.

That bird gives me the creeps, squatting like an old man trapped in a feathered body.

When I cross the parking lot that separates churchyard from cornfield, I feel the WiFi signal tickle my hardware, what's left of it, and lock on. I ignore the waiting messages and send a quick flag to Ben. Then I pace all the way back to the tack room in the barn, wishing I'd disappeared with my friends.

I open the door expecting darkness. But the light is on and Ben's standing in the tack room as if he owns it. I jump like I've just seen a ghost.

Going by Ben's creased khakis, the navy-blue jacket folded over his arm, and his wind-twisted hair, he's just arrived. I didn't see his Jeep by the farmhouse. Of course not. He must have filtered it. Still doesn't explain why he's inside while I'm outside.

"Figured you'd be here. Door was unlocked," he mumbles when I hit the dimmer switch, then stare at him, forcing an explanation. "What the hell happened? Your biometrics went nuts, then shut down completely."

Ben holds up a tablet that's orders of magnitude sleeker than either the one I'd rescued from the cemetery grass or the one I use to rent videos from the library. A tablet with a screen so filter-blurred, I can't see my own data.

"I got spooked, I guess."

"And you hit your panics? You're supposed to only do that to keep an upload from happening."

I step inside, squeezing around Ben. He's taking up most of the tack room. I set the teens' tablet on my cot, atop a worn army-surplus blanket.

"Kids set off firecrackers in Caulk's Field." I try to breathe easy so my biometrics won't show me up as a liar. So Ben won't come up with more questions. I follow quickly with, "You're early."

Our next meeting isn't until Monday. Today's Friday. (I look at my watch: it's Saturday now.) I hold my ground. I'd signed waivers, sure, a neophyte journo, eager to do anything for an edge. Signed more after the incident too, when they'd put me back together.

I haven't signed a single document that says Ben can sneak up on me without calling first.

He doesn't say anything, just holds out his hand. He knows I'm lying about something.

I pull the data-patch from the back of my neck and give it to him. The patch blurs where the military font—OCR-Alpha—spells out *Rand, Eleanor*, in classified letters.

"Close your connection, just in case," I say. If Tallulah can touch me, what else might she do? Jump through my cameras onto Ben's tablet?

Ben's forehead furrows like it did when I told him about my visions in the hospital, but he nods. "Nothing goes up without a filter anymore."

There'd been a server crash just after the *incident-that-didn't-happen*, Ben had admitted a couple of weeks ago. The explosion, he said while waving a hand like it was nothing, had pushed too much data through too fast. Too much energy through the lenses. "A ghost in the machine," he'd joked lamely. I groan at the memory.

Based on the no-sender emails that keep coming to me from the server, and the jumble of lost-file messages circulating at Ben's company, they're still having

problems. "How's the cleanup going, anyway?" I ask. Sometimes I can get Ben talking, especially if he wants information from me.

He looks up and winks. "Better." Then he focuses on the tablet.

"Anyone pick it up on the news?" I know I'm annoying him while he's trying to do his job, but if news does get out, my peaceful recovery will come to an abrupt end. Ben and IARPA made a bit of a PR show out of my equipment trial. Giving a new reporter with failing eyesight the chance of a lifetime. The only civilian journo to take the deal on the new hardware. Later, a nurse had mentioned others, while she'd watched me swallow huge antibiotics and the immunosuppressant that made me pee orange and move slowly down the hallways for days, but Ben shook his head when I asked. "That's classified."

Now his smile tightened. "Nope, no news is good news, as always." He looked at me carefully. "How's your research coming?"

The hospital therapist had suggested I work on a story for the *Galena-Gazette*. A way to keep my skills up and reconnect with my hometown. Ben agrees that that's great cover for what we're really working on. So I told folks, my dad included, I was doing research on the battlefield and the graveyard. I'd downloaded some articles and films at the Chestertown library. Making my own cover. Learned more about Tallulah. I shrug. "It's a project, I guess."

Ben frowns in sympathy. "I know this isn't what you thought you'd be doing. But we've got big plans for your eyes, once they're fixed. And the area's history, that old battlefield, the fact that the churchyard's supposed to be haunted, those are great details. If you could really see ghosts, this is the place they'd be, right?" He punches my shoulder lightly.

I stare at Ben through the lace of my friends' faces. Sara, James, and Mej, trapped between us, with no way home.

I know how historic this area is. A long-dead great-something uncle had been the first to report on the Battle of Caulk's Field to the Boston *Independent* back in 1814. At school, we all had to learn about the battle. I'd hiked through Caulk's Field at night on a dare and then to St. Paul's. Hadn't seen a single ghost back then, and went on WKHS county radio to talk about it, because the Frain twins had a show. Dad had been so proud.

Since when has Ben been interested in the area's ghosts? In any ghosts at all?

A light goes on at the farmhouse. My dad's shadow appears in the window. I wave out the door and he turns the light off. Giving me my space. Time to heal. I can't look at him without wanting to weep.

Ben misinterprets my expression. Bumps my shoulder again with his fist. "We've got new filters, Eleanor. A new plan too. We think your platoon ghosts might be a feature, not a bug, if they're really . . .," he pauses, "Properly presented and constrained." He swallows hard enough that I can hear him in the stuffy room. "Imagine what ghosts could show us." Ben laughs too loudly, making me jump again. "So tell me what happened out there tonight."

I press my lips together. I've let him take too many friends already.

Tallulah keeps me company on dark nights. She sits by me, saying nothing, while I try to drive the last of the ghosts from my eyes. She senses when my moods darken, when I want to shut down completely, to hit the panic switch and not reset it. To pluck out my eyes and throw them at the heron. She dances around the tiny gravestones, the ones lost in the bushes and tangled in the roots of the bicentennial tree. Reenacts scenes from her movies. She brings friends, sometimes. Her sister. Once, an old soldier who didn't know what to make of my eyes and went muttering back to his grave. A child who threw ghost-white rocks at the bicentennial tree, but couldn't shift the heron. None of them fill the holes in my memory, but they distract me. Tallulah does that for me.

Now Ben stands over me, waving his sleek tablet. “Why did you lock down, Eleanor?”

And I tell him a little about Tallulah. Not much. About the feel of Tallulah’s hand through my arm.

I don’t know what I expect to happen next. A quick Jeep trip to the hospital, maybe.

But Ben’s lips tighten in a thin smile. He puts his hand to his chin. “That’s very interesting.” He uses the tone people adopt when interesting means dangerous. His gaze goes all hunting-bird and he hefts the backup patch in his other hand. Looks hard into my eyes. “I should take you to Bethesda, but you know what will happen there.”

I do. They’ll disconnect almost everything, and I’ll be worse than blind until they can figure out what’s happening. Trapped. Unable to stop seeing the dying ghosts. I pray for Ben to suggest something else, no longer trusting my own voice.

He clears his throat and gives me an apologetic smile. “We have a new filter I’d like to test. So if there *is* a ghost out there at St. Paul’s, or over in Caulk’s Field, you can safely capture it.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. In the hospital, I kept telling him that when the blast broke the filter chip the first time, I saw everything—the dying and the dead—as a bird fell burning through the hole in the roof. What I didn’t tell him was that I saw my friends’ faces doubling, lifting from their bodies, passing through me.

The dead were looking for a way out. It seems they always are.

Ben hadn’t believed me then.

One night, I told Tallulah about the whole mess, thinking she’d tilt her head and mouth the long syllables for “Dar-ling.” But I’d forgotten how smart she was. Everyone always forgot that. That’s not the story you hear about Tallulah in town. There, she’s just the ghost of a hard-partying star who loved the limelight. I know better, now. Tallulah pays attention.

When the explosion happened, my footage went through me and uploaded filterless. James, Sara, Mej, and the kids caught in the explosion—seared onto my eyes, and maybe onto files and footage where they didn’t belong, getting everywhere. James had loved computers once, as much as Tallulah loved the camera.

So Ben’s team is testing the filters again. Making them stronger. Trying to trap themselves some ghosts. “What’s in it for me?”

Ben smiles, looking genuinely pleased. “Getting your vision under control, for one. Two: a bigger stake in the equipment. Three: a new assignment, back in the world. Somewhere more connected.”

“Doing what?” I can’t believe they’ll put me in the field again. I’ve seen too much, and I keep seeing more, even though I shouldn’t. Even though facts are blurred and the details disappear.

Ben reaches into his bag and takes out a folder. The font is Futura, not OCR-Alpha, so I can read it just fine. Ben explains anyway. “This is the new marketing plan for the recorders. If there really are ghosts, people will be able to control their ability to see them. Maybe eventually interact with them. Imagine the potential, Eleanor. Imagine what we could learn.”

I sputter. Marketing? Taking the implants public? “No one’s going to want this, once they realize what it means.” When I think about it, I feel sick. Ben’s right. The public will love the idea.

People always want to see what they think they shouldn’t.

“We can test out the filters tonight, while it’s still dark. I have a demo right here.” Ben holds up a pair of what look like night-vision goggles, with extra knobs. “And a software update for you.”

Ben's other stakeholders must be desperate to get something—anything—on the wider market.

"No." *Ad Astra Per Aspera*, the gravestones in the churchyard say. *Dulce et Decorum Est. Rest in Peace. Prepare to follow me.* I remember sneaking through the fence as a teen. The comfort of not seeing anything in the graveyard besides the stones.

"I hate to tell you what you already know, Eleanor," Ben's voice wavers. "You really can't say no."

And I know that, too. I sit on my cot in the tack room and let him run the install. Feel the filters drop over the centers of my eyes like a slightly darker shade of a color I can't see.

Then we go back outside. Me, stumbling slightly in the dark, and Ben wearing his ridiculous goggles. Looking for Tallulah.

We cross the parking lot and, beneath the shadow of the bicentennial tree, I open the wrought iron gate and let Ben step through first. I follow, my feet tentative on the moss-woven brick path. The signal flickers and Ben groans.

"Sorry, I should have warned you," I say. "When's the last time you were off-signal?"

Ben pushes past me and steps back through the gate. "New plan."

"Where are you going?"

"The filters won't work without a signal," he says. "I'll boost yours from here."

At Ben's voice, the heron unfolds its wings and drops from the big limb overhanging the cemetery. It knifes past me, its neck stretched out to the deadly point of its beak; all objective and mortality. Its huge grey wings seem to span a whole churchyard section as it glides to the pond, skimming gravestones.

The bird's silent flight makes Ben gasp and step back farther into the parking lot. "That thing is huge."

"If you won't come inside the fence, how are you going to test the filters?" I say. My breath passes ragged between my teeth.

He points at me. "You can test them. We need this, Eleanor. We can boost your range just for the test. These?" he lifts the opera glasses, "are stuck."

I wait again. My feet wobble on the brick. I'm inside the fence, and he's outside. I don't have to do a thing, and it will be morning soon. He'll send me to the surgeon. Everything will go dark.

Ben isn't all that great at keeping secrets when he wants something badly. He told me about the upload problem, the way the filter failed in the explosion. He'll tell me what he really wants if I wait long enough.

While I wait, I see movement in the corner of my eye. Imagine I smell cigarettes. *Hello darling.*

But Ben doesn't speak. He only stares back at me, pleading.

"Look, it's nearly dawn. I haven't slept. Whatever you want here will have to wait until tomorrow." The heron returns silently to its branch.

"Please, Ellie, just try? So I don't have to go back and tell them your rig is malfunctioning and they take you back in?" he finally says.

"Why, Ben? What's so urgent?"

He plants his feet outside the fence and leans on the railing, wincing when he feels the signal go away again. "I have a big presentation on Monday. If they don't get what they want—and they want this to go live—they're killing the program. Know what that means, Eleanor?"

I do know. No more support for me or my gear. Either they'll let me degrade out here, in peace, or they'll disconnect me entirely. I don't know which would be better.

I think back to what I'd wanted to be, before the surgeries, before the explosion—that wasn't. To the fresh-from-school journalist who thought telling everyone about everything I saw was the key to the world. I wonder if I can see my dad one last time.

"Know what, Ben? I've been doing my research," I said. "On the implants. On Tallulah. On everything. On Caulk's Field. You know that in 1814, the British heard an entirely different story at home than our folks did? That their brave Captain Parker who sailed up the Chesapeake didn't ambush farms and burn the coast, and that he wasn't routed by a small band of untrained farmers and a teenager with a gun and some buckshot?"

Ben looks confused. "So?"

"So there's always been an information battlefield. Part of the story's always filtered out."

At the corner of my left eye, I see Tallulah has changed her clothes. She's wearing the white shirt and dark pants from *Lifeboat*. Typing my words on an improbable ghostly Remington portable.

The ghosts in my eye, who had been my friends—James, Sara, and Mej—seem to be watching her. Can she help them find their last names in all the data? Take the real story to a wider audience?

I look across the graveyard, to where the family stones are: *Stamford, Beamton, Rand*. See souls dreaming of stars, escape.

Since I told her everything, I've worried Tallulah would get loose and run wild across the networks. Cause a scandal.

I stop pacing the brick walkway. Turn to face Ben. "You want me to catch a ghost for you. A soul. And send it where?"

He shakes his head. "It's not like that. They're not souls. They might be left-behind electrical charges or figments of very active imaginations." He winks at me. I stifle a growl and he keeps talking. "They're like data—pulses of energy. They're not really people. The explosion in your cameras caused havoc on the network that first time like ball lightning does. And storm surges. It's just data, Eleanor. It's all data."

Ball lightning. And surges. Fine. I take a deep breath and focus on the image still pale in my augmented retina. I focus on James, Sara, and Mej. The kids they're sheltering. All their faces, scared and screaming.

"It's not just data," I say. "Data doesn't haunt a network. It doesn't disappear files and send emails to people who should never receive them. You can't contain this."

He shakes his head. Puts on his sport coat. The graveyard's getting chilly. "Every system has gremlins and bad code."

"Not like this," I whisper, blinking the image away. I step farther into the graveyard.

Ben leans over the gate. "Where does she usually come from?" He looks back and forth, the lenses of his goggles shining an oily red.

I realize what he wants, finally. "You want to put Tallulah in your presentation? Upload her?" Trapping Tallulah would buy Ben's project more time for certain. He'd have a real proper show on his hands.

Ben nods, eager. "Can you help me? Can you tell me where she is? Or any of them? Or can you see one for me and upload it to my tablet? The network's filtered and locked down. She won't ever get any farther."

I think about how much farther Tallulah could go. Probably work her way right back into the movies, and love it. Or, thinking about what I've learned about her, probably finding some jerk to yell BOO at.

If she made it all the way out, she'd make the news. Movies. Commercials. Anything she wanted. Tallulah would love that.

Motion at the corner of my right eye. Long fingers holding a pale cigarette. She's done her hair in a late 1920s bob, and is wearing an empire-waist, sleeveless beaded gown that, if anyone could hear it, would clatter when she walked.

"What are you staring at?" Ben asks. "Is it her?" He puts his hand over the fence and touches my arm, raising gooseflesh.

"A pile of heron crap," I say. He lets go of my arm and backs out from under the tree, brushing reflexively at his jacket. I keep talking. "You'd keep her off the wider network? Use her only for the presentation?"

"I would," Ben says. "She'd stay in here," he taps his tablet. "No way out."

Tallulah tilts her head in my peripherals. The center of my vision is filtered thanks to the patch, but Tallulah never comes straight at me. She frowns and taps her cigarette. Furrows her brows. When her sister appears, Tallulah waves her away. Doesn't want her to be caught and boxed.

No more than I do.

"I can't see her clearly, Ben. Go ahead and bump up the signal as high as you can." I pull my patch from my neck and hand it to him.

He's eager to get this done. Slaps the patch on the tablet. The sky beyond the pond is turning a paler shade of night. I watch the tablet screen glow, then fade.

He passes the patch back to me.

"Good to go, Eleanor. And don't tell a soul, okay? This is classified until further notice."

"My pleasure, Ben." I feel the signal boost as I reattach the data patch on my neck. Sense a bit of the network beyond Ben's tablet. Turn my head so I can't see Tallulah, and sit down on her gravestone. Feel a chill as she comes to sit beside me. "Ready?" I say.

"Ready," Ben says from beyond the fence. Tallulah nods, too.

She comes in from the side of my right peripheral, looking beautiful. Like a young movie star. Winks at the filter and "*tsks*," like it's nothing. James is there, with Mej and Sara. All the kids. Waiting for her. James points out a path and together they slide right past the filter. They reach the wider signal.

They turn and she blows me a kiss. Shoulders a portable Remington typewriter. Her lips form the word "Darling."

She waves at the other ghosts. Draws their pale shades with her. Out into the broader signal. Out where they can tell all the news.

I catch Ben's eye and smile sadly, my head tilted to one side. "I don't see anything I'm not supposed to see, Ben."

The heron readjusts its wings with a clatter. Across the churchyard, the sun rises. My eyes see what's around me clearly for the first time in years. I rise from the gravestone and start the long walk back through the cornfield, where there's a light in the kitchen that means home. ○

THE SENTRY

Frank Smith

Frank Smith is a writer of science fiction, fantasy, and pop culture stuff. He lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter, but can be found online at *frank-smith.com*. The author's writing has appeared in *Bastion Science Fiction Magazine*, and he has recently completed *The Awesome*, a coming-of-age novel about the apocalypse. Frank's first story for *Asimov's* is about veteran returning home to suburban Titan. Readers may detect an influence from a childhood spent in the backyards of Ohio.

The dog caught a baby rabbit. Though the dog had torn it all to hell, the bunny was still alive. The five-year-old was nonsensical when she ran into the living room. Rick was sleeping on the couch with a baseball game playing on the second-hand holo-box. It was the first game he'd been able to nap through since returning home. Old Earth, and its twenty-first-century relics, persisted into the twenty-fifth. Some things are just forever, which is to say, the war-weary Saturn colonies didn't have the imagination to create new ways to play baseball.

The girl grabbed a handful of Rick's leg hair and pulled him awake.

Rick had been dreaming about the war, the boring parts of the war. In the dream, he was tromping through some damp armpit of the Universe that smelled like composted diarrhea. His ears were deafened by machine-gun fire; his vision obscured by the breath-fogged visor on his helmet. An unexpected noise—a snap, a cough, a fart—from the periphery could bring on hell. Until then, the march was waiting, trudging, boring repetition.

His body missed the weight of his gear, of a rifle slung over his shoulder, of the air-compressor unit strapped to his back, of the helmet that pinched his ears tight against his head, and the pounding stress headaches of a firefight. He knew all that as well as he knew the feel of cold steel walls through his coat and the low hum of starship engines rumbling beneath his feet.

And he knew pain.

The pain of his leg hair being torn out brought Rick into the proper moment. He could tell the difference between his daughter's clutchy little hand and a bullet. Not that he'd ever been shot; he'd only seen people shot; only shot people; he knew what a heat-seeking, explosive bullet did to a person. A bullet tearing through flesh didn't produce this kind of benign pain, and because he knew that, he didn't hit her. He

would never do that, but he had to think—fast—and recalibrate his position. The moon of Tethys, and the campaign to hold it, was far away. The living room of Rich's geodesic dome on the boonies of Titan was in the now. His daughter wasn't an European with a belly full of bombs. She hadn't run out of the brush crying for help, hadn't distracted his buddies, hadn't turned the world inside-out.

Rick held his daughter's small hand in his. Her hand was baby-fat soft compared to his calloused paw. She released a tuft of his curly leg hair into his palm. He held her hand too tight. She didn't say anything, didn't cry, but he held her hand too tight.

"Woolie caught a bunny," she said, looking away.

"Ah, no," Rick said. "Sorry, baby."

Rick coughed until his shoulder bones rattled. He needed a minute to get the air moving around his lungs again. The girl had backed off.

"I'm all right," Rick said.

The other day the dog had found a colony of baby bunnies in the woods, and she'd destroyed all of them, leaving their corpses on the front porch. The animals of Titan weren't as hearty as the animals in the Old Earth storybooks Rick had read as a kid. Scientists blamed it on the terraforming. In a few more generations, the animals would get stronger, they said. Rick figured, nope, all wrong—we're talkin' an animal-level understanding of how bad an idea it had been to send arks carrying humans and animals to these far-off rocks so many centuries ago. Bunnies. Until that morning, Rick hadn't seen a bunny since he was a kid.

Rick scooped the girl into his arms so she could cry into his shoulder. He headed for the door, thought better of it, and started down the hall to his daughter's room, thought better of that, and went out the front door, down the gravel driveway—zircon and lonsdaleite crunching under foot—across the faded asphalt street, and right up to his neighbor Paul who was sitting on a lawn chair and spraying the leaky end of a hose at a flower bed. Paul had been to war. The last war. When humans fought over ideals, rather than poorly terraformed land. He understood some of it.

"Watch the kid for me, Paul. I got a thing," Rick said. He was so hot from embarrassment he worried his ears might fall off.

Paul had the girl stuck on his lap before he could argue. "Where's Pinky at? You know I'm bad with kids."

"She's gettin' her beingness realigned down at the center, Paul. Says she's happy I'm home, but I've got the house all enturbulated. She's gonna kill me when she finds out I fell asleep with the kids outside. I've only been home a week, and . . . the dog caught a bunny and I don't know what I'm going to walk into, so just keep an eye on this one, okay?"

The girl eased against Paul's bony knees and gave Rick a studious look.

"Hurry up and do what you gotta do," Paul said, plopping the girl onto her feet, and instructing her how to hose down the azaleas.

Rick lit off toward home, crunching gravel under his bare feet, and breaking all hell to see what his dog had done.

The boy stood between two forsythia bushes where he kept watch over the bunny.

"You go, dog. You go," he said, waving a stick in the dog's general direction.

The dog wasn't having it. She was a tame, neutered soul, but she had fresh blood in her mouth and that will fuck up an animal. The kid bopped the collie on the nose, turning her growl into a plaintive whine. Before his last tour, Rick had brought the dog home as a present for the boy's birthday. If Rick couldn't be there, the dog would be around to keep watch.

Rick gave the dog a light bang on the head with the bottom of his fist. It was what he did when he didn't have time for a pat but didn't want the dog to feel unacknowledged; he didn't want the dog to be an asshole either, begging for attention. He put a

little more weight on the tap, though, and the dog seemed to understand it had done something wrong. Fixed him with those sad dog eyes. Rick put his hand on the kid's chest, and moved him away from the scene.

"Don't you hurt the bunny," said the boy.

Blood pumped from the baby rabbit's neck where a hunk of flesh had been torn to shit. Its eyes were wide and crazy as its brain struggled to keep the body alive. Little feet thumped the empty air. Not even a housecat would be so mean as to do this much damage to a thing and leave it like this.

Rick kept the boy at a distance, knowing that it was already too late to keep him from seeing what he'd seen. Blood stained the ground, turning the green grass black. These things happened with animals. Rick grew up out in the badlands, where the terraforming hadn't gone deep enough into the soil. He'd watched his grandmother dispassionately snap chickens by their neck for Sunday dinner. His father hunted the wild antelope-things that rutted like deer and were native only to terraformed Titan. It happened. Animals died. These animals were lucky to have lived on land so abundant. The colonies on Europa saw four generations of terraforming turn to complete fuck-ass nothing. Dusty wastelands not fit for human or beast. No wonder they wanted a cozy place in the suburbs of Titan, Tethys, or Dione. There was room at the table, Rick thought, but that's not how the governing bodies felt.

The boy started to cry. It was obvious that he didn't want to, that he tried to keep the tears from spilling out, but he'd hit the point where his emotions were too big not to break.

"It's okay," Rick said. He stepped away from the baby bunny and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "Get the dog."

"No, go away. Leave us alone," the boy said. "I mean it, go away."

The boy had to be told twice to get the dog. Once the boy had Woolie by the collar, he looked back up at the guy who was his dad.

Rick didn't like looking into eyes that red from crying. He could never hold on when he saw someone that fucked up about something.

They'd made him a sergeant because he was the only one from his platoon to come back—promoted him, then sent him home. There's your honorable discharge. There's your life back.

Every single moment between when the transport ship had hit the makeshift tarmac on his first day in-country and wandering the supply road alone was just evil shit. Rick could still hear his commanding officer yelling at the troops to get off the shuttle after they'd hit atmosphere. The transport shuttle had swooped in under fire, hit the ground, opened the doors, and dumped all its human contents out while the hover fans were still moving—and then it was gone, up beyond the atmosphere. Rick and the other men and women who were drafted to do their patriotic duty ran with their heads low toward the wastelands, which swallowed them up whole.

Their terraformed surroundings on Tethys had grown so fast that the atmosphere still retained a high ammonia count. Going without your breathing gear for too long could be deadly. Tethys was the last and the shittiest of the Saturn colonies. The colonists had light-blue skin as a result of the bad atmo or some other science-y biological thing Rick didn't understand. Old Earth had been burned up by the end of the twenty-first century. The remaining people of Earth had spent another century floating around the Solar System in arks, while the scientists of the day attempted to terraform the uninhabited rocks surrounding Saturn enough to sustain life. The clock had run out and the colonists took what they could get. After three generations of dirt farming went nowhere, war broke out on the European settlements. The colonists were content to slaughter one another for a few decades. Then Tethys decided to intervene and send over a peacekeeping force and everything went to

complete shit. War broke out between the two orbs, eventually bringing in the surrounding moons.

As far as Rick was concerned, if the Europeans wanted Tethys, they could have it. But then he got drafted into the war and had to have enough of an opinion to hold a gun. So he thought of his family. Doing so made it easier to buy the line about how it was Titan's job to hold the Europeans from moving deeper into the Saturn territories.

Despite his attempted patriotism, Rick had accomplished nothing; neither had his platoon, nor the entire campaign, as near as he could see. He couldn't even remember most of his part in it. For him, the war started when he was shoved out of the transport shuttle, and it ended two years later when a patrol found him wandering a supply road close to base camp on Tethys.

Rick's platoon had been ambushed during a routine reconnaissance mission. At least that's what Rick was told during his debrief. He couldn't remember any of it, except in flashes—a girl, a bomb, and pain.

A hover transport had found Rick strolling along a supply road like he was back home on Titan and not in this savage hell. Thirteen dogtags were clutched so hard in his fists that they were crusted with his blood. Both of Rick's ears were a ruined mess and all of his atmo gear was gone. The medics were able to grow his ears back—ears they could clone, anyway—but his lungs were left permanently ragged from the toxic air.

When Rick got back to the geodesic domes that made up base camp, some colonel said, "Soldier. What happened out there?" And Rick said, "Man, I got no fucking idea."

"Well," said the colonel, "see the medic, and we'll look into finding you a bunk."

Rick still wondered at how much of a mess the situation had become for that to be an acceptable answer to a superior's question. Then he got promoted sergeant. After that, his assignment was misfiled, and he spent the rest of his tour on base rather than out in the shit. When his tour was up, he grabbed the next transport home. Rick believed he'd cast some dark magic out in the jungle—a spell that allowed him to return home, if he just kept his head down.

In his dreams, if he could sleep long enough, Rick could begin to remember what had happened and why his breath was ragged and he had to remind his body how to take measured breaths. The girl and her belly full of bombs. When he woke up, it was all gone.

"Go find your sister, she's with Paul," he said to his son. If there was anything Rick had learned, it was that people need orders when they've got emotions.

"Don't hurt the bunny," the boy said. "You have to help him."

"Son," the man said, "I am."

"No, you're not! You're going to kill him. You're a killer."

Rick felt the darkness inside him move across his face like a cloud blocking Saturn. He heard rifle blasts, saw people go down—men and women from the same home as him, sent spaceward to the colonies on transport ships. The enlisted didn't get the luxury of passing through the dead times in cryosleep. A boring month crammed into transport, backs up against the cold steel walls of the ship, drugs keeping their bodies ready for war. The dead could just as easily have been Rick, were he born on a different rock.

A silence descended. The boy backed away from his father.

Rick crouched over the bunny and touched the animal's head. It twitched as it looked at him. He didn't know if it could really see, didn't know what was happening in its mind, didn't care that everything had slowed down to where time dripped like blood thickening around a wound. He stroked his thumb between the rabbit's wet eyes.

Breathing was difficult. The pain in Rick's chest threaded through his shoulders and down his arms. He tasted blood when he coughed. The rattle of his rifle, that

first time in-country, had startled him so bad he'd bitten the inside of his cheek, filling his mouth with the thick taste of blood. What came out of his lungs here in his backyard, however, tasted like rot. He focused on his task.

The rabbit had calmed down under Rick's touch. He felt around to where the bunny's ears met its neck, and he put his hand around its head, so he had its shoulders braced and popped the bones—quick.

"Dad," said the boy. He hadn't run, and he hadn't gone off to find his sister. He wasn't one to disobey his father; he'd still had an obligation to the bunny.

"I thought I told you to go," Rick said, keeping low to the ground so his son couldn't see the ruined bunny. He pivoted his head to stare past the boy.

"It's all right," Rick added.

"Is the bunny dead?"

"Woolie messed him up pretty bad. He's gone. It's not your fault. I know you tried to save him."

The boy's glare burned through his father.

"You knew he'd die, and you did nothing to save him. I saw what you did."

"I won't ask you again: find your sister."

As he watched the boy go, he let himself feel sick about it all for a moment.

There were parts of himself that he couldn't access before he'd gone to war and other parts he no longer understood. Every day he was home he hoped to discover the balance, even when he had to do to the fucked-up things that hurt. The rabbit hadn't asked to be born on a planet where a dog was too dumb to kill it right.

Rick shook it off, went to get the dog. He'd fallen out of the habit of tying Woolie to a tree, and it took him longer than he liked to find a leash that would work. They had an invisible dog fence that was keyed to a widget on the dog's collar. When the dog approached one of the preset barriers, a sensor would fire up an invisible wall that would block Woolie from leaving the yard.

Woolie whined when she was leashed to the tree. The sound sparked a flame of anger in Rick's chest. He could crank up the setting on the fence, send the dog chasing a ball, and let the fence take care of Woolie. She was getting old. A rough stun would likely stop her heart, giving her a cleaner death than what she'd given the rabbit.

Rick scratched the dog's ruff. She stuck out her tongue and panted.

He knew traps like that—invisible barriers keyed to widgets like the one on the dog's collar or to certain DNA signatures. He'd learned to never be in the front of the wave. The barriers on Tethys did more than stun a dog's heart. Rick knew all this, remembered it like it had come from a book he'd read, and didn't know if it was real. In his dreams, late at night, he'd seen people carved in half like they were an anatomical cross-section in a textbook. How could he remember that, how could he put that image to proper words? He'd seen organs sliced apart by science, frozen in time for one uncomprehending second before blurring together into an organic mess.

Rick found he'd stopped scratching Woolie's neck and was instead holding her by the throat. The dog pawed at the ground. He let her go. She whined as he walked away.

He took his time doing it, but Rick dug a hole in the ground and lowered the bunny into the earth. He kicked dirt over the grave.

The kids were still at Paul's house. The girl was watering the flowers, unfazed by the day's trauma. The boy was in a sulk: crouched on the grass with his knees under his chin. Paul shrugged when he saw Rick crossing the street, as if to say, "Kids, huh, what can you do?"

"How is everyone doing?" Rick said.

The boy glowered.

"Dad!" said the girl. She sprayed Rick's leg with the hose as she ran to hug him.

He was glad for the hug. She'd run to him like that when he'd first stepped off the transport. This little kid saw him as a hero returning home. Rick didn't feel right about that hero shit. He had accomplished nothing resembling heroism. He had not been home to help his kids grow. Being around them now made him feel inhuman: a mechanized tool, a thing for killing.

The way the boy looked at him hurt. Rick didn't know why it hurt so bad.

If he could do just one thing to make the rest of his life matter, it would be to ensure that these kids, whether they could grow to care for him or not, never had to do what he'd done.

"My dad murdered a wounded bunny," the boy informed Paul.

Paul took the information in stride. "You should be kind to your dad," he said.

"He could have saved the bunny," said the boy.

"And that's what he did, in his way."

"Now, Paul, just . . . don't complicate this," Rick said, feeling the pain of breathing catch down deep in his lungs.

Paul leaned forward on his elbows, hunkering down so far he tested the lawn chair's balance. He wagged a finger at Rick—

"This man here, your dad, needs your kindness right now. He did the right thing in the situation that he had. He doesn't feel good about it, though. Isn't that right, Rick? Tell the boy."

Rick's jaw was set tight. His face was hot, his eyes wet.

The atmosphere of the boy's face began to change, to become clear.

Rick sat on the damp grass, and breathed the air. ○

Schrödinger's Door



The front door is closed
awaiting a knock,
a knock-knock without.
No time has passed
yet the ending is near.
Open the box.
Don't open the box.
It does not matter.
The box itself is the matter
and it has already been seen
to be open and to be not open.
Like the front door
for which there is no knock.
If you walk in the woods,
if you walk alone in the woods,
if you listen carefully
you can hear it now,
the knock and
the not knock.

—Richard Bruns

The expanded novel version of Allen M. Steele's *Arkwright* will be published by Tor sometime in 2016. Three parts of that saga have already appeared in *Asimov's*. These tales are "The Legion of Tomorrow" (July 2014), "The Prodigal Son" (October/November 2014), and "The Long Wait" (January 2015). The concluding, but also very much a stand alone, story now reveals what happened to . . .

THE CHILDREN OF GAL

Allen M. Steele

i

Sanjay Arkwright's mother was sent to Purgatory on Monone, the second day of Juli. As dawn broke on Childstown, Aara was escorted from her home by a pair of guardians, who silently walked two-legged on either side of the heretic as they marched her to the beach. Sanjay and his father Dayall quietly accompanied them; carrying belly packs and walking on all fours, they kept their heads down to avoid meeting the gaze of the townspeople who'd emerged from their cottages and workshops to observe Aara's passage into exile.

It was a day of shame for her family, and yet Aara maintained an upright stance. Even after a guardian prodded the back of her neck with his staff, she refused to lower her head or place her fores against the cobblestoned street, but instead strode forward on her hinds, gazing straight ahead in almost haughty dismissal of her neighbors. For this alone, Sanjay was proud of his mother. She would obey the Word of Gal, but not with the humiliation expected of her.

On the beach, a group of disciples had already gathered to form a prayer circle. They squatted in a semicircle facing the Western Channel, where the sister-suns Aether and Bacchae were beginning to set upon the distant shores of Cape Exile. Illuminated by the bright red orb of Calliope rising to the east, they cupped their fores together beneath their lowered faces, and chanted words passed down to them from their mothers and grandmothers:

"Gal the creator, Gal the All-Knowing,

"Forgive our sister, who denies your love.

"Gal the creator, Gal the All-Knowing,

"Guide our sister as you watch from above. . . ."

Their voices fell silent as Aara and her guards approached. If they'd expected Aara to join them, they were disappointed. Aara barely glanced at them as she walked by, and Sanjay had to fight to keep his expression neutral.

Dayall noticed this. "Don't smile," he whispered to his son, "and don't stand. Everyone is watching us."

Sanjay didn't reply, but only gave his father a brief nod. He was right. This was a sad moment, and also a dangerous one. Most of those who'd followed them to the waterfront were Galian, and even if some were friends of the family, a few were pious enough to report the slightest impropriety to the guardians. Any sign of support from Aara's family, and the deacons could easily extend the same sentence to her husband and son as well. It had been many yarn since the last time an entire family was sent to Purgatory, but it had been done before.

R'beca Circe, the deacon of the Childstown congregation of the Disciples of Gal, stood on all fours beside Aara's sailboat, accompanied by the deacons from Stone Bluff, Oceanview, and Lighthouse Point who'd traveled across Providence to attend Aara's trial. The guardians led Aara to them, then stepped aside, standing erect with their staffs planted in the sand. R'beca rose from her foreshoot to look Aara straight in the eye; the other deacons did the same, and for a long moment everything was still save for the cool morning breeze that ruffled their ceremonial capes and Aara's braided red hair, revealed by the lowered hood of the long black robe she'd been given by the guardians.

Then R'beca spoke.

"On the first day of the Stormyarn," she recited, "when the disciples were separated from the children who stayed behind, Gal told his people, 'Follow my Word always and obey the lessons of your teachers, for my way is survival, and those who question it shall not.' Aara Arkwright, it is the finding of the Deacons of the Disciples of Gal that you have questioned the Word of Gal, and therefore committed the sin of heresy, for which you have refused to repent. How do you plead?"

"I plead nothing." There was no trace of insolence in Aara's voice; as always, when she was given a direct question, she delivered a direct answer. "I am neither guilty nor innocent. I saw what I saw . . . and there is nothing in the Word that says it cannot exist."

R'beca's eyes grew sharper. She pointed toward the sky. "Clearly, there is no light there save that of Gal and her suns. Even at night, when Aether and Bacchae rise to cast away the shadows and the stars appear, Gal remains in her place, bright and unmoving. Stars do not suddenly appear and vanish, and none may approach Gal."

Almost unwillingly, Sanjay found himself following Deacon R'beca's raised fore with his gaze. As she said, Gal the creator hovered almost directly overhead, a bright star that never rose nor set but remained a fixed point in the sky. It had been this way throughout the one hundred and fifty-two sixyarn of Eosian history, from the moment when Gal had carried the Chosen children from Erf to the promised land of Eos.

None but fools or heretics ever questioned this. Those who did were purged from Providence, sent alone to the mainland to live out the rest of their days in a place where survival was unlikely.

Yet Aara wouldn't recant. "I did not lie then, and I'm not lying now. I saw a new star in the sky during my turn on night watch, one that moved in the sky toward Gal."

"So you question Gal's dominance? Her status as creator who cannot be challenged?"

"I question nothing. This was not an act of blasphemy, Deacon . . . it was an obligation to my duty to report anything unusual."

Hearing this, the disciples crouched on the beach wailed in bereavement. As they slapped their foreshoots against their ears, R'beca's mouth curled in disgust. She'd offered Aara a chance to repent and beg for mercy, only to receive a stubborn reiteration of the same defense she'd given during her trial. Again, Sanjay felt pride surge past his sadness. His mother had never been one to back down, and she wasn't about to do so now.

Yet her courage wasn't met with sympathy. As the other three deacons lowered themselves to their hinds and cupped their foreshoots together, R'beca reached beneath

her cape and produced the symbol of her office, a large white knife she carried with her at all times. The knife made of the same material as the large block of Galmatter that, along with the teacher, resided within the transformer inside the shrine. It was one of the few remaining relics from the yarn before the Great Storm, when the Chosen children had first come to Eos from Erf. R'beca clasped the pale blade in her left fore and, raising it above her, intoned the words everyone expected to hear:

"In the name of Gal, creator of Eos and mother of her children, I send you, Aara Arkwright, into exile. May Gal grant you safe passage to Purgatory, where you shall live the rest of your days."

Then she brought the knife forward and, with one swift stroke, whisked its blade across the right side of Aara's face. Sanjay's mother winced, but she didn't cry out when the blade cut into her cheek; it would leave a scar that would mark her as an outcast for the rest of her life, making her a pariah to any community on Providence to which she might try to return. She could be put to death if she was ever seen on the island again.

R'beca turned her back to her and, still on her hinds, walked away. "You may say farewell to her now," she murmured to Dayall and Sanjay as she strode past. "Be quick."

Sanjay and his father were the only ones to approach his mother. By custom, everyone else who'd witnessed the ceremony stood erect and silently turned their backs to her. Through the crowd, Sanjay caught a glimpse of Kaile Otomo. Her long black hair was down around her face, making it hard to see her expression, yet she briefly caught his eye and gave him the slightest of nods. Then she turned away as well.

Dayall stood erect to pull off his belly pack. It was stuffed with clothes, a couple of firestarters, fishing tackle, and his best knife, all permitted by the guardians to be given to someone facing banishment. Aara took it from him, then let her husband wipe the blood from her face and take her in his arms. Sanjay couldn't hear what his father whispered to her, but he saw the tears in her eyes and that was enough. After a few moments, Dayall let her go, and then it was Sanjay's turn.

"Aara . . ."

"It's all right. Everything will be all right." He wasn't expecting the wan smile that crossed her face as she accepted the belly pack bulging with food he'd taken from their pantry. She dropped it on the ground next to his father's. "I'm even more sad about this than you are, because I won't be around to see you and Kaile become bonded, but . . ."

"It's not fair!"

"Hush. Keep your voice down." She glanced over his shoulder, wary of being overheard by the disciples or the deacons. "Of course, it's not fair. I was only doing my duty. But the guardians have their duties as well, and R'beca"—another smile, this time sardonic—"well, she'd call it blasphemy if winter came late. My only sin was not realizing this before I opened my mouth."

Sanjay started to reply, but then she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him close. "This is not the end," she whispered. "We'll see each other again."

Sanjay knew this wasn't true. Once someone was sent to Purgatory, they never returned from the other side of the Western Channel. Yet perhaps his mother wasn't facing reality, or she was speaking of the afterlife promised by the deacons, when all who believed in Gal would join once their souls had departed Eos. So he simply nodded and told her that he loved her, and she borrowed his fishbone knife to cut a lock of his red hair to take with her. Then a guardian stepped forward to impatiently tap the sand with his staff.

It was time for her to go.

The catamaran was sound and sturdy, its outrigger hull constructed from cured umbrella palm, its mainsail woven from bambu threads. Sanjay had built the boat with his own fores, with help from his friend Johan Sanyal; they'd done this while Aara was under house arrest, awaiting the arrival of the other deacons and the commencement of the trial whose outcome was all but certain. They'd made the boat quickly but carefully, taking time from the spring fishing season to fashion the small craft for his mother. The master boatbuilder, Codi Royce, hadn't objected when the two boys didn't work on the fishing fleet's boats for several precious days; as Sanjay's mentor, he knew just how important this was.

Although it wasn't strictly permitted, no one had objected when Sanjay discreetly hid a harpoon beneath the oars. It wasn't likely that Aara might encounter an ocean monarch while crossing the channel. The leviathans were nocturnal; along with the receding tide, this was a reason why outcasts were sent away at dawn, to give them time to reach Cape Exile before the creatures rose to the surface and started hunting. Nonetheless, it might give her some measure of protection if she encountered one during her journey.

Like all Providence inhabitants, Aara was an expert sailor. Once she'd stowed the packs, she didn't immediately raise the sail but instead used the oars to push herself away from the beach and out into the Childstown bay. As a small measure of respect for her, none of the fishing boats set out when they were supposed to. On the nearby docks, their crews silently waited as Aara paddled away, allowing her a chance to begin the long, sixty-kilm journey from the island to the mainland.

Aara was a small figure sitting in the catamaran's stern when she finally lowered the outrigger and raised the mainsail. As it unfurled to catch the morning wind, there was a single, long gong from the watchtower's bell, the ritual signal that an islander was being sent into exile. As it resounded across the waters, Aara raised a fore in a final wave.

Sanjay and his father waved back, and then they stood together on the shore and quietly waited until her boat couldn't be seen any more.

ii

In the days that followed, Sanjay did his best to put his mother's banishment behind him. With less than three weeks—thirteen days—left in summer, there was much that needed to be done before the season changed: fish to be caught, dried, and preserved, seeds planted and spring crops tended, houses and boats repaired. He and his father put away Aara's belongings—they couldn't bring themselves to burn her clothes, a customary practice for the families of those sent to Purgatory—and accepted the sympathy of those kind enough to offer it, but it took time for them to get used to a house which now seemed empty; the absence of laughter and the vacant seat at the dinner table haunted them whenever they came home.

Sanjay didn't feel very much like attending the Juli service at the shrine, but Dayall insisted; if he didn't make an appearance, the more inquisitive disciples might wonder whether Aara's son shared her blasphemous beliefs. Dayall was an observant Galian if not a particularly devout one, and the last thing they wanted to do was draw the attention of the guardians. So Frione morning they joined the disciples in the dome-roofed temple in the middle of town. Once they'd bowed in homage to the sacred genesis plant that grew beside the shrine, they went in to sit together on floor mats in the back of the room, doing their best to ignore the curious glances of those around them. Yet as R'beca stood before the altar, where the box-like frame of the transformer

stood with its inert block of Galmatter in the center, and droned on about how the souls of the Chosen children were gathered by Gal from the vile netherworld of Erf and carried “twenty-two lights and a half through the darkness” to Eos, Sanjay found himself studying the teacher resting within his crèche behind the altar.

Even as a child, Sanjay had often wondered why the teacher didn’t resemble the children or their descendants. Taller than an adult islander, his legs had knees that were curiously forward-jointed and hinds lacking the thin membranes that ran between the toes. His arms, folded across his chest, were shorter, while the fingers of his fores were long and didn’t have webbing. His neck was short as well, supporting a hairless head whose face was curiously featureless: eyes perpetually open and staring, a lipless mouth, a straight nose that lacked nostrils. And although the teacher wore an ornate, brocaded robe dyed purple with roseberry, every youngster who’d ever sneaked up to the crèche after services to peek beneath the hem knew that the teacher lacked genitalia; there was only a smooth place between his legs.

These discrepancies were explained by the Word: the teacher had been fashioned by Gal to resemble the demons who ruled Erf, and the creator had made him this way to remind the children of the place from which they’d come. This was why the teacher was made of Galmatter instead of flesh and blood. According to history everyone diligently learned and recited in school, the teacher and the disciples had fled the mainland for Providence just before the Great Storm, leaving behind the unfaithful who’d ignored Gal’s warning that their land would soon be consumed by wind and water.

The teacher no longer moved or spoke, nor had he ever done so in recent memory. Yet his body didn’t decay, so he was preserved in the shrine, along with the transformer and the Galmatter block: they were holy relics, reminders of the Stormyarn. In her sermons, R’beca often prophesied the coming of the day when the teacher would awaken and bring forth new revelations of the Word of Gal, but Sanjay secretly doubted this would ever occur. If it did, he hoped to be there when it happened; he’d like to see how someone could walk on all fours with limbs and extremities as misshapen as these.

Kaile kept a discreet distance from Sanjay after Aara left. He missed her, but understood why; her parents, Aiko and Jak, were strict disciples who’d become reluctant to have their daughter associating with a heretic’s son. And while she wasn’t as rigid in her beliefs as her parents, nonetheless Kaile was a Galian who did her best to adhere to the Word. So he saw her only on occasion, sometimes in town but more often in the morning on the waterfront. While Sanjay was a boatbuilder—indeed, his family name, which his father had taken after he bonded with his mother, was an old Inglis word for those who built water craft—Kaile was a diver, trained from childhood to descend deep beneath the channel to harvest scavengers from the sea floor. When they spotted each other during those days, they’d exchange a brief smile and a wave, a sign that she still cared for him and would return once her parents let her.

Dayall, on the other hand, retreated into himself. As Juli lapsed into Aug and then Sept, Sanjay watched as his father became increasingly morose. He seldom spoke to anyone, let alone his son, instead adopting a dull daily pattern of getting up, having breakfast, opening his woodworking shop and puttering around in it all day until it was time to close up and go home, where he’d eat and then go to bed. Although he was still bonded to Aara, it was understood that this no longer mattered; other women could come to him as prospective suitors, and he could bond with them and take their name if he so desired. But Dayall was approaching middle age, and it was unlikely any woman in Childstown would want to take as her mate someone who’d once had a heretic as a wife. So Sanjay could only watch as his father came to terms with his loss; he was helpless to do anything about it.

More than once, Sanjay found himself cursing his mother for not having the foresight to keep what she'd seen during night watch to herself. He began to suspect that her eyes might have been playing tricks on her. It wasn't uncommon to see streaks of light in the night. Old Inglis teachings, passed down through generations, called them meteorites, small rocks that occasionally fell from the sky. Perhaps Aara had seen something like that and had mistaken it for a moving star. She'd sworn otherwise when she'd been called before the council of deacons, though, and Aara was an intelligent woman who wasn't likely to mistake a meteorite for anything else. Nonetheless, Sanjay wondered whether, just this once, his mother might have been a fool . . . or even the heretic the deacons had proclaimed her to be.

When Monthree came around in Sept, the last week of summer, it was his turn again to take the night watch. Garth Coyne, Sanjay's uncle and the mayor of Childstown, dropped by the boat shop that afternoon to let him know that he could skip his turn if he wished. Garth would assign someone else instead, and Sanjay could wait three weeks to take the Monthree watch in Dec.

Garth meant well, of course. Part of the purpose of the night watch was to look out for anyone who might try to cross the channel from Cape Exile, whether it be a sinner attempting to abduct an islander for their own vile purposes—which was the disciples' explanation for the occasional disappearance of someone from a village—or an exile attempting to return. Garth was the mayor, but he was also Dayall's brother, so he was more sympathetic than most, and also aware of the bitter irony of having Sanjay stand watch to prevent his own mother from coming home. Yet Sanjay turned him down. He didn't want anyone to think that he was reluctant to assume the task that led to Aara's downfall.

That night, he stood in the wooden watch tower, anxiously watching the sky in hopes that he'd spot the same mysterious star Aara had seen. Yet thick clouds had moved in shortly after Calliope went down, so all he could see was the diffuse glow that its distant companions, Aether and Bacchae, made through the overcast. Even Gal was nowhere to be seen. The only light he saw was the luminescent glow of nightjewels floating on the bay. Sanjay ended his turn in the tower with nothing more interesting to report than an ocean monarch breaching the surface a short distance out beyond the reefs; with summer coming to a close and the waters becoming colder, the predators were more often to be seen off the Providence shores.

He'd become accustomed to the fact that he'd never see his mother again when Kaile came to him on Thursthree morning. He was sitting beside a fishing canoe, patching a tear in its mainsail, when she walked across the beach on all fours and stopped beside him.

"Lo, Sanjay," she said. "How are you?"

Sanjay looked up at her, surprised by the casualness of her greeting. She hadn't spoken to him all season. Many of his friends had distanced themselves from him, but he'd missed her more than anyone else. Summer was a time for lying down with one's lover, and his bed had been cold and lonely without her. Sanjay had lately begun to wonder if he'd lost her for good, so her abrupt return caught him unprepared.

"Good, thanks. Just working on this boat." He tried to pretend that her appearance meant little to him, but his fores slipped as he attempted to slide a threaded fishbone needle through the sail patch. He nicked his right forefinger instead.

"Oh . . . watch yourself!" Kaile exclaimed as he hissed in pain. "Here . . . let me."

Before Sanjay could object, she bent closer, took his fore in her own, and gently slipped his finger into her mouth. Her lips formed a sly smile around his finger, and her eyes gleamed mischievously as her tongue, warm and moist, played with his fingertip. Sanjay felt himself becoming aroused. He shifted his hinds nervously, hoping she wouldn't notice, but if she did, she gave no sign.

"There," she said, withdrawing his finger from her mouth. "All better?" He nodded and she smiled. "So . . . I was just wondering if you'd like to go diving with me today?"

"Diving?" He'd done it before, but he wasn't trained the way she was. "Why?"

"Just because." A slight shrug. "We haven't seen much of each other lately, and I thought . . . well, it might be a way of getting back together again." Another smile. "Besides, my crew is running a little behind, and we could use a some extra help."

Sanjay looked across the keel of the upended canoe. Codi was squatting nearby, working with Johan to finish a new boat. He didn't have to ask whether they'd overheard the conversation; Codi and Johan traded an amused look, and then his mentor nodded. "Sure, go ahead. We can take care of things today."

Sanjay hesitated, but only for a moment. "Of course. I'd love to." Leaving the patch unfinished, he removed his tool kit from his vest and gave it to Johan for safekeeping. "After you," he said, and she smiled again and turned away, leading him on all fours down the beach toward the nearby docks.

He was just beginning to admire the way the way Kaile's body moved beneath the diaphanous shawl she wore over her halter and thong when she paused to let him catch up. At first he thought she was merely expressing fondness when she raised herself erect on her hinds and slid her fore through the crook of his elbow, but when he stood up so she could pull him closer as if to give him a kiss, she murmured something only he could hear.

"There's something I need to tell you," she whispered.

"What about?" Sanjay glanced around to see if anyone else was nearby. They weren't alone; others were walking past. The waterfront was busy as it always was this hour of the morning.

"Not here," she said softly. "Wait until we're out on the water, where no one can hear us." She paused, then added even more quietly, "It's about what Aara saw. . . . I've seen it, too."

iii

The fishing fleet bobbed on the warm blue waters of the bay, six canoes with sails furled and anchors lowered. This late in the season, it was necessary for them to venture further away from shore in order for the divers to catch anything of significance; it would take the nine weeks of autumn, winter, and spring for the breadfish and scavengers born the previous year to grow large enough to be caught. So the boats had to spread out in order for their crews to bring home a decent catch; this made suitable conditions for a conversation that wouldn't be easily overheard.

Nevertheless, Sanjay had a hard time containing himself from asking Kaile what she meant. Two others were on her boat: Sayra Bailee, a young girl who'd become a diver only three year ago, and Ramos Circe, the boat captain. Neither Sanjay or Kaile were very much concerned about Sayra—she wasn't terribly bright and tended to keep to herself anyway—but Ramos was another matter. He was the guardian appointed to the fleet to observe the fishermen and help them maintain spiritual purity while they worked, and the fact that he was also Beacon R'beca's son only made him more dangerous. They would have to be careful of him.

So he and Kaile made small talk with Sayra as they paddled out into the bay, saying nothing that really mattered while ignoring Ramos. They were about a half-kilm from the reefs that separated the outer reaches of the bay from the Western Channel when Ramos called for them to take down the sails and drop anchor. By then their

craft was a hundred rods from the next nearest boat, all the better for the privacy they sought.

Sanjay watched as Kaile stood erect, dropped her shawl and, as an afterthought, discarded her halter as well. She wore nothing now except her thong, which covered very little. He'd never forgotten how beautiful she was; with the bright red sun on her light brown skin, she was as radiant as Gal herself. Taking off his vest and kilt, he was glad that he'd decided to wear a thong himself that day; otherwise his reaction would have been obvious to all. Sayra also chose to dive almost entirely nude, but at sixteen sixyarn, she hadn't yet blossomed into the full-breasted womanhood Kaile had achieved at twenty-two.

In keeping with his position as a guardian, Ramos pretended not to notice either of the women. He waited while everyone buckled on diving belts and attached knife sheaths and woven collection bags. "All right, over you go," he said once they were ready. "Good hunting. May Gal keep you safe."

"Thank you." Raising her fores level with her shoulders, Kaile dove headfirst into the water, disappearing with barely a splash. Sayra followed her a moment later, leaping from the other side of the canoe. Sanjay took a few more breaths to fill his lungs, then he joined them, although not nearly as gracefully.

The instant he was submerged, he instinctively squinted, forcing shut the watertight nictitating membranes of his eyes that Gal in her wisdom had provided her children. At the same time, the fingers of his fores and the toes of his hinds spread apart, opening the webs between his digits that allowed his people to be fast and effortless swimmers. Although he wasn't the practiced diver Kaile and Sayra were, nonetheless he could stay underwater for three or four mins at a time, allowing him to descend the twenty rods it took to reach the bottom. Although the sunlight faded, he could still see Kaile clearly, swimming toward the seafern jungle that lay across the bay floor.

It was here that they searched for scavengers, the spidery crustaceans that prowled among the ferns, feeding on the remains of nightjewels, breadfish, and other pelagic species who'd died and drifted to the bottom of the sea. Because they tended to blend into their environment, catching them was easier than finding them. Kaile was much better at this than he was; she'd collected two while he was still searching for one, and shook her head when he picked up a half-grown crustacean and showed it to her: *too small, let it go*.

His lungs were beginning to hurt by then, so he followed her back up to the boat and watched as she tossed her bag over the side and took another one from Ramos. The scavengers died as soon as they were exposed to the air, of course, but it didn't render the tender flesh beneath their carapaces inedible. Kaile and Sanjay took a min or two to replenish their lungs, then they went down again. They ignored the fat breadfish that occasionally swam past, leaving them for the long-line anglers in other boats, and stayed clear of the reefs, which tended to be patrolled by seaknives who'd attack any humans who dared enter their domain.

Over the next couple of hours, they made seven descents, stopping for a few minutes after every second or third dive to float on their backs and rest a little. Sanjay noticed that, while Sayra stayed fairly close to the boat, Kaile was gradually leading him further away. Apparently Ramos expected her to do this, because he didn't seem to mind that they'd have to swim quite a few rods to reach the boat again. By late morning he'd decided to take a little nap, lying back against the stern with an arm across his eyes.

On their last dive, Sanjay caught a full-grown scavenger, but when he held it up for Kaile to see, she surprised him by shaking her head. Instead, she pointed to the surface. Looking up, he saw that the keel of the boat was nowhere to be seen.

Understanding what she meant, he dropped the scavenger, then rose with her to the top.

Once they were there, she paddled over to him and, to his delighted surprise, draped her fores across his shoulders and pulled him close. "Kiss me," she whispered, and he was only too happy to oblige. "Good," she said once they'd parted. "Now hold me close while we talk. This way, everyone will think we're just making love and leave us alone."

By then, he'd almost forgotten the reason she'd asked him to go diving with her. "Can't we do both?" he asked, playfully stroking her breasts.

"Maybe later." A wry smile that quickly vanished as she pushed his fores away. "For now, just listen. I was standing watch last night . . ."

In furtive tones quietly spoken while she allowed him to caress her, Kaile told Sanjay about her turn in the watchtower the night before. The night was clear, without the clouds that had ruined his own attempt to observe the sky, but she hadn't been making any particular effort to see anything unusual. All the same, it was in the darkest hour of the night, when the sisters were setting to the east and before Calliope had risen to the west, that her eye was drawn to a peculiar movement in the zenith.

"A small star, quickly moving from east to west." As she said this, Kaile glanced up at the sky. "It went straight toward Gal, quickly at first, and then . . ."

She hesitated, looking down at Sanjay again. "Then what?" he asked.

"It slowed down and . . . Sanjay, it merged with Gal." Her mouth trembled as she said this, her eyes wide. "It was if the two became one. For just a few secs they became brighter, then Gal went back to normal."

Losing interest in her body, he let his fores fall to his sides, moving back and forth to keep himself afloat. "How could . . .?"

"That's not all. I kept watching, and it was almost first light when something else happened. The little star parted from Gal again and went back in the direction it had come, but this time, instead of vanishing beyond the horizon, it started going faster and getting brighter, until it formed a tail. I heard thunder, like a storm was coming in, but there were no clouds. Then . . ."

Again, Kaile looked away, but this time not at the sky, but to the west. "It came down over there," she said softly, and when Sanjay followed her gaze, he saw that she was staring at the distant grey line that marked the shores of Cape Exile.

"Purgatory?" He could scarcely believe her. "Are you sure?"

Kaile glared at him. "Of course I'm sure!" she snapped, her voice rising a little as she swam back from him. "I'm telling you, I saw what I . . .!"

She stopped herself. Like Sanjay, she remembered that this was exactly what Aara had said when she'd defended herself before the deacons. And Sanjay had spent enough time in the tower himself to know that the view of Cape Exile from up there was excellent. Save for the high cliffs of Stone Bluff to the north and the summits of Mt. Lookout and Mt. Roundtop in the island's forest interior, there was no higher vantage point on Providence. Indeed, it was whispered among islanders that, from these places on clear nights, one could see faint, glimmering lights on the mainland, a sign that at least some of those who'd been banished there still lived, struggling to survive in the terrible place from which Gal had rescued her most devout followers.

"I believe you," he said quietly, and paddled closer to her again. "It sounds like you saw the same thing my mother did. Something like it, at least."

"No. That was *more* than what Aara saw." Glancing past him, she returned her fores to his shoulders once more. "Kiss me," she whispered. "Ramos is watching."

Again, their mouths came together. This time, though, Sanjay took little pleasure from it. He was thinking about something else. "Have you told anyone?" he said softly, his face against her wet hair.

"No." She sighed, and despite the warmth of the water, Sanjay felt her tremble. "After what happened to Aara, how could I?"

"No, of course not." As obedient to Gal as Kaile was, it would have been mad to repeat Aara's mistake. Deacon R'beca wouldn't have given any more credence to a second act of blasphemy than she had the first. He found himself wondering whether anyone else who'd recently stood watch might have seen the same thing Kaile did, but had likewise remained silent about it, for fear of following Aara Arkwright into exile. But if there had been any similar sightings, they would never know, unless . . .

"There's only one way we'll ever know," he said quietly, thinking aloud.

Kaile looked him straight in the eye. "How?" Then she realized what he meant, and her mouth fell open. "No . . . no, you can't be serious."

She was right. Even as the notion entered his mind, Sanjay thrust it away. None but those whom the deacons cast out of Providence ever made the dangerous crossing of the Western Channel. In fact, no one was allowed to leave the island except fishermen and those who used sailboats to travel from one coastal village to another. All that was known of the rest of Eos came from ancient maps belonging to the First children that had been handed down through the generations. They depicted great continents separated from one another by vast seas, with Providence the largest island of a small equatorial archipelago just off the coast of the landform known as Terra Minor. Gal had forbidden any exploration of these distant lands, though, so her children knew next to nothing about the rest of the world. Even the maps were closely held by the council of deacons, rarely seen by anyone else.

"No, you're right." He shook his head. "We can't do that. We'd . . ."

A shrill whistle from their boat, then Ramos's voice came to them from across the water. "All right, you two . . . enough of that! Back to work!"

Then Sayra called to them as well. "Yes, enough!" she yelled, childishly scolding them. "Save it for your bed, Sanjay, if she'll let you take her to it!"

Kaile forced a smile and raised a fore, but Sanjay wasn't about to let her go quite yet. "It's not a bad suggestion," he said. "I've missed you very much. Will you . . .?"

She laughed, this time with genuine amusement, and pushed herself away from him. "Help me gather a few more scavengers," she said, "and I'll think about it."

Then she upended herself and, with a kick of her hinds, disappeared beneath the surface. But not before Sanjay caught the coy wink of an eye that told him that she'd already made up her mind.

iv

Kaile kept her side of the bargain. When Calliope was going down and the boats returned to shore, she came home with Sanjay.

Dayall was already there, working on dinner. He was surprised when Kaile walked in with his son, and it was the first time in weeks that Sanjay saw him smile. As if nothing had ever changed, he put another plate on the table, then pulled some more mockapples and vine melons from the pantry and put them out along with a jug of wine. Sanjay had brought home a scavenger he'd caught, and it wasn't long before it was steamed, shelled, and on the table. They talked about his diving trip while they ate, and for once Dayall's part of the conversation wasn't limited to monosyllables. For just a little while, it was as if everything had gone back to the way it had been before Aara left.

Once the meal was over and the kitchen cleaned up, Dayall murmured something about how he thought it might be nice to spend the night at Garth's house. Sanjay

politely objected, but he knew why his father was going over to his uncle's place. Dayall gathered a bedroll and took another jug from the wine cabinet, and was gone before Kaile could thank him for dinner.

Sanjay lit a fire and took the small wooden box of dreamer's weed down from the mantle. Kaile blew out the candles and they shared a pipe by firelight, saying little as they gazed into the flames and let the pipe smoke soften their senses. The night was cool, so he closed the window shutters. The fire warmed them, and it wasn't long before their forms wandered to each other's bodies. Soon they were curled up together upon the rug, rediscovering the pleasures they'd been denied all summer.

Kaile considered going home, but decided that the hour was late enough already that any excuses she might make for her absence would be transparent. Besides, it was time for her parents to learn that she wasn't going to leave Sanjay no matter what they thought of his family. Sanjay couldn't have agreed more. As the fire began to gutter out, he led her through the darkened house to his bedroom. They made love again before exhaustion caught up with them and, wrapped within warm blankets, they fell asleep in each other's arms.

Sanjay had no idea what hour it was when he felt a fore upon his shoulder and heard a voice quietly say his name. Slow to emerge from the depths of sleep, his first thought was that Kaile trying to rouse him for another round of lovemaking, but when the voice repeated itself he realized that it wasn't her who was speaking to him. Kaile was still asleep beside him, while the person trying to wake him up was crouched next to his bed. He opened his eyes and turned his head, and in the wan amber light of the sisters seeping in through a crack between the closed shutters of his bedroom window, he saw Aara.

He jerked upright in bed, not quite believing what he was seeing. Before he could say anything, though, his mother laid a fore across his mouth. "Shhh . . . be quiet!" she hissed, barely more than a whisper. "Don't wake your father."

"Sanjay?" Kaile twisted beside him, still more asleep than awake. "Sanjay, what's going on?"

Aara's eyes widened, her mouth falling open in dismay. "Is that Kaile?" she asked softly, as if it would be anyone else. Still stunned by his mother's presence, he gave a dumb nod and she sighed. "Oh, no . . . I wasn't expecting this."

"Aara?" Kaile woke up as suddenly as Sanjay had, and was just as astonished. "Aara, what are you . . . ?"

"Hush." Aara lifted a finger to her mouth. "Keep your voice down. I don't want Dayall to know I'm here."

Kaile went silent, but Sanjay could feel her trembling beside him. "He's not here," he whispered. "He's spending the night at Garth's house."

Aara let out her breath in relief. "Good . . . that's good. Wait a sec."

She moved away from the bed, and a moment later there came the tiny sparks and soft sounds of firestarter flints being scratched together. The fish-oil lamp on his clothes chest flickered to life, and now they could see her clearly. Aara wore the same black robe she'd been wearing the last time Sanjay had seen her; although its hood was drawn up over her head, he could see the facial scar left by R'beca's knife, a reminder that she was an exile who could be killed if anyone found her back on Providence.

The thought must have occurred to her as well, because Aara's expression was wary when she turned to them again. "Kaile," she said quietly, "I can trust you, can't I? You're not going to run straight to the guardians, are you?" She looked straight at the girl, meeting her gaze with suspicious eyes.

Kaile hesitated just long enough for Sanjay to realize that she was wrestling with her conscience. "No . . . no, I won't," she said at last, much to his relief. "I'm not Aiko or Jak. I didn't want you to be banished. But Aara, why . . . ?"

"I can't tell you that. Not now, anyway. No time." A nod toward the closed window. "It'll be morning soon, and we must be gone by then." A pause. "Sanjay, I mean . . . Kaile, you're staying here, and I'm going to have to ask your word not to tell anyone that I was here or where . . ."

She stopped herself, but not before Sanjay knew what she meant to say next. "You want me to go with you?" he asked, and she nodded. "To Purgatory?" Again, a solemn nod. He felt a cold sensation in the pit of his stomach. "Why?"

Before Aara could respond, Kaile spoke up again. "I saw a light in the sky last night while I was on watch. Just like the one you saw, but instead it merged with Gal before it came down on Cape Exile. That has to do with this, doesn't it?"

A grim smile. "Yes, it does." The smile disappeared and Aara was thoughtful for a moment. "How many people know you spent the night here?"

"My parents. Dayall." Kaile laid a fore on Sanjay's shoulder. "Just about everyone who saw us leave the beach together after we went diving yesterday."

Aara sighed again, this time shaking her head. "So the guardians will question you when he goes missing. I don't want you to be have to face them or R'beca on my account. I can't make you come with us, but . . ."

"No. I want to come."

Startled, Sanjay stared at her. She met his gaze and gave him a brief nod. Yes, she was aware of what she was getting into. And she was doing it anyway. "Very well," Aara said as she turned away again. "Get up and get dressed, and be quick about it. I've got a boat waiting for us."

"A boat from Purgatory? Who . . .?"

"Never mind that now. We're leaving in two mins."

Before Sanjay could ask any further questions, his mother left the room. No more lamps were lit, but as he and Kaile climbed out of bed, the soft creak of the pantry door told him that she was gathering food. He wondered why she'd bother to do so, but there was no time to ask.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked Kaile as he dug into his chest to give her a sarong, tunic, and calf boots that would be warmer than the thin shawl she'd worn yesterday. Autumn was only a couple of days away, and they would be traveling far from home. "You know what this means, don't you?" he added as he put on nearly identical clothes.

Kaile didn't say anything, but the silent nod she gave him told all that he needed to know. For better or worse, they were about to join his mother in Purgatory.

v

The sisters were beginning to set when the three of them slipped out through the back door. Kaile had mentioned that it was Johan's turn to stand watch, which Sanjay took as a good sign; he knew that his best friend often stole a few hours of sleep in the tower so that he'd be rested enough to go to work the next day. In any case, though, they avoided the streets as much as they could, and instead quietly made their way on all fours through shadowed alleys between cottages, sheds, and shops until they reached the forest on Childstown's eastern border. No one spotted them; the town was asleep.

Aara led Sanjay and Kaile to the footpath leading south to Mountain Creek, which flowed through the forest from Mt. Lookout to the northeast. The trail would take them to the coastal estuary where the creek drained into the bay. It was there, Aara told them; the boat that had carried her back across the channel was awaiting her return.

"You came over tonight?" Although they were now out of earshot from the village, Sanjay was careful to keep his voice down. "How were you not spotted?"

The forest they walked through was dark, the black fronds of the umbrella palms and sunshade trees forming a shadowed canopy that blotted out all but thin slivers of sisterlight. All the same, Sanjay could see the soft smile that played across Aara's face. "The exiles have ways of getting here," she said. "You'll see."

"But the monarchs . . ."

"That's . . . something else entirely." Her smile disappeared. "Now hush. No more questions."

Sanjay and Kaile exchanged glances, but obediently fell silent. Sanjay knew better than to argue with his mother. Still, he thought as he shifted the straps of his belly pack, she was being a little too mysterious about all this.

About three kilms from Childstown, they reached the end of the trail. Through the wild roseberry and bambu that grew along the shore, the estuary lay before them, its waters faintly shimmering with the reflections from Aether and Bacchae. From the other side of a genesis plant that rose beside the trail, Sanjay could make out a catamaran resting upon the narrow beach. As they approached the genesis plant, though, he heard a soft voice, male yet unlike any he'd heard before.

"The specimen appears to be fully mature, approximately one-point-eight meters in height, its width . . . call it a little less than one meter at its base. As with all pseudonative species, its leaves are matte-black in pigmentation, a genetically engineered adaptation to the primary's lesser magnitude and, in this instance, generation of cyanobacteria and the subsequent production of atmospheric oxygen and nitrogen. Its form clearly indicates its descent from the giant *hosta*, albeit considerably larger. Altogether, it appears that the alteration of its basic genetic pattern has been remarkably successful, especially considering the . . ."

"We're here," Aara said, raising her voice just a little.

Realizing that he was no longer alone, the person speaking abruptly stopped talking, but not before Sanjay spotted the individual to whom the voice belonged. Taller than any of them—as tall, in fact, as the genesis plant he stood beside—he stood upright on his hinds, his figure shrouded by the hooded cloak which covered him from head to toe. Indeed, as they came closer, Sanjay was surprised to see that, beneath the cowl, he wore a dark veil across the lower part of his face, a mask that completely hid his features.

Yet it was his voice, in the brief moments in which Sanjay heard it, that intrigued him the most. Although he'd been speaking Inglis, many of the words he'd used were unfamiliar; Sanjay had clearly heard what he'd said, but didn't understand his meaning. And the accent was strange: sharper, with an odd inflection of the syllables.

"Oh, good. You made it back." The figure stepped away from the genesis plant, and for an instant Sanjay noticed something held in his right fore before it disappeared within the cloak. "No trouble, I hope?"

"None. We got out of there without being spotted. But—" Aara hesitated, then stood erect to indicate Kaile "—I had to bring someone else. This is Kaile, my son's betrothed. She was with him when I found them. We couldn't leave her behind."

A disgruntled sigh from the other side of the veil. "Are you sure? This could complicate things, you know."

"If she stays, the guardians will know that she was with Sanjay when he disappeared, because they were seen together all day yesterday and last night. They'll try to work the truth out of her, and R'beca is very good at that. With any luck, my husband and her family will believe that the two of them simply ran away for a time, as young people sometimes do."

Sanjay now understood why Aara had taken food from the pantry. Once he and Kaile were found to be missing, which was inevitable, the most likely explanation would be that they'd taken off into the wilds for a little while, perhaps to a little lean-to shed Sanjay had secretly built in the mountains. Unbonded lovers occasionally did this when they wished to be free of the prying eyes of family and neighbors; it wasn't a practice condoned by the disciples, but tolerated nonetheless. If they were fortunate, no one would search for them for a little while, preferring to give them their privacy while they rehearsed their future roles as a bonded couple.

"Very well. If we have no choice." The figure nodded his hooded head toward the boat. "Teri is waiting for you on the boat. If you'll give me a second . . . a sec, I mean . . . to cut a leaf. . ."

He stepped back toward the genesis plant. "Stop!" Kaile snapped, raising her fores. "You can't do that!"

The stranger halted, looked around at her again. "I'm sorry, but what . . . ?"

"It's forbidden to touch genesis plants." Kaile was horrified by what she'd seen, but also perplexed. "It's in the Word . . . everyone knows that!"

Sanjay was just as confused. One of the most basic tenets of the Word of Gal was that even wild plants such as this must never be harvested. They were the means by which Gal had created Eos, and touching them without the supervision of a deacon during the spring and autumn solstice rituals was considered a sacrilege. Every child was taught this the first time they were taken into the forest for their lessons in woodlore. How could this person be so unaware?

"My apologies. I . . ." The stranger stopped. "Perhaps I should introduce myself. I'm Nathan."

This was a common enough name among islanders. In Galian lore, it was said to have belonged to the archangel who beseeched Gal to carry the Chosen children from Erf to the new world. Yet Sanjay noticed that he didn't mention a family name as well. "Sanjay Arkwright," he replied, and gave a formal bow, clasping his fores together as he bent forward from his knees.

"I know." When Nathan returned the bow, it was in a peculiar fashion: stiff-legged and from the waist, fores still hidden by his cloak. "I've been wanting to meet you every since your mother told me about you. In fact, you're the very reason we're here."

"I am?"

"We don't have time to discuss this," Aara said. "Calliope will be coming up soon. We need to be away before we can be spotted from town." She pointed to the nearby boat. "Hurry, please."

They followed her to the beach, where a man about Aara's age was already raising the catamaran's sail. As they walked toward the boat, Sanjay noticed that Nathan remained upright, apparently preferring to walk on his hinds even though the others dropped to all fours. His gait was also slow, as if each step was an effort. Was he crippled? Perhaps, but if so, why risk undertaking a sea journey?

He tried to put all this aside as he helped his mother and Aara stow the belly packs they'd brought with them, then helped the captain push the boat out into the water. He could now see the reason why the boat had been able to travel across the channel without being detected. Its wooden hull, mast, benches, and oars were painted black, and even the sails had been dyed the same way. Against the dark waters of the bay at night, the craft would have been very hard to spot.

He wondered if the inhabitants of Purgatory had ever crossed the channel before, using this same boat. Perhaps. There were rumors that exiles had sometimes returned to Providence for one nefarious reason or another; every so often, a relative or close friend who'd been left behind had disappeared for no accountable reason. But maybe . . .

"All right, everyone settled in?" The captain, who'd given his name as Teri Collins, glanced around from his seat at the tiller. Sanjay and Kaile had taken seats amidships, while Aara and Nathan sat in the bow—Nathan awkwardly, hunched slightly forward with his hinds stretched out straight before him, still covered by the long folds of his cloak. "Very well, then," he said as he used an oar to push away from the shore, "Sanjay, raise sail, please."

Sanjay turned around to grasp the line dangling from the mast and pulled it down, unfurling the black sail. The tide was beginning to go out and the morning breeze was starting to come in; the sail bellied outward and the boat quietly slipped away, its outrigger skimming the water surface.

"We need to be silent now," Aara whispered, bending forward to speak to Sanjay and Kaile. "No talking, no movement, until we're well past the reefs. Understood?"

Sanjay nodded, as did Kaile. It was still dark and Calliope hadn't yet risen. If they were lucky, no one in Childstown would see a boat heading out into the bay. Nonetheless, he hoped that Johan was asleep in the tower.

As the boat entered the bay, though, and the town came within sight, no lights appeared within its windows, nor was there the gong of the warning bell. Childstown remained peaceful, ignorant of the intrusion that had occurred during the night. Teri must have sailed these waters before, because he accurately steered the boat through the break in the reefs that lay a couple of kilms offshore. The hull sliced through the glowing nightjewels and scattered the curious knifefish who'd ventured close to the boat. High above, Gal observed their passage with an unblinking and omnipresent eye.

Looking up at her, Sanjay hoped that Gal would forgive her children for their transgressions. Providence had become a long, black shape gradually receding behind them, its inland mountain range rising as three low humps. He'd rarely before been this far out on the channel, and only then in the light of day. The sea was a dangerous place to be at night.

He prayed that the monarchs wouldn't notice them.

His prayers went unanswered.

vi

"**M**onarch," Teri said. "Off starboard bow."

He spoke calmly, yet there was no missing the urgency of his tone. Sanjay turned to look. At first he saw nothing; the sea and the night both were still dark. Then, about three hundred rods from the boat, he caught sight of a dorsal fin, light grey and shaped like the tip of a knife, jutting upward from the dark water. It was running parallel to them, neither approaching nor moving away, as if the massive form to which it belonged was swimming along with the catamaran. Tracking, observing, waiting for the moment to strike.

To the east, the first scarlet haze of dawn had appeared upon the horizon, tinting the curled gauze of the high clouds with shades of orange and red. He'd hoped that, with the passing of night, the danger of being noticed by an ocean monarch would pass as well. But this one hadn't yet descended to the channel's lowest depths. It was still prowling the waters midway between Providence and Cape Exile in search of prey.

And now it had found them.

There was a harpoon lying on the deck at his hinds. Sanjay started to reach down to pick it up, but Teri shook his head. "No need," he said, his fores steady on the tiller. "Just wait." He glanced at Aara. "Move to the center of the boat, Aara. Everyone, hang on."

Sanjay stared at him in disbelief. Surely he didn't think they could possibly outrun a monarch? Many had tried to do this, but they'd only succeeded if they were already far enough away that it couldn't catch up . . . and this one was pacing them. Their only hope of survival lay in using a harpoon against it when it attacked.

He began to reach for the harpoon again, but then his mother, who'd walked back from the bow, laid a fore against his wrist. "Just watch," she said quietly. "The same thing happened to us on the way over."

"A monarch attacked you last night?" He had trouble believing her. "How did . . .?"

"Wait and watch." Aara smiled as she squatted across from him and Kaile, then nodded toward Nathan.

The stranger remained in the bow. Until then, Sanjay hadn't taken much notice of the long object wrapped in waterproof bambu cloth that lay on the deck before him. Picking it up, Nathan removed the covering, revealing something of the likes Sanjay had never seen: a slender, rod-like thing, broad in the center but tapering to what appeared to be a hollow tube at one end, with a handle fitted with a small ring projecting from its lower side. Its surface gleamed dully in the wan light of the coming dawn, and Sanjay realized to his surprise that it was made entirely of metal: very rare, and almost never found in such a quantity.

"What is that?" Kaile asked.

No one answered her. Nathan rose from his bench and, hinds firmly planted against the gentle rocking of the boat, cradled the object in his fores. Turning away from them, he lowered his hood and pulled down his veil. Sanjay couldn't see his face, though, only the short-cropped red hair on the back of his head.

"Coming at us!" Teri snapped.

Sanjay looked in the direction the captain pointed. The monarch had veered toward the catamaran, its fin creating a frothy furrow through the water. Fifty rods from the boat, the fin abruptly disappeared beneath the surface. Nathan knew that the monarch was diving in preparation for an attack, but even as he grabbed the harpoon and stood erect to do battle, he heard a faint, high-pitched whine from the object Nathan was holding. From the corner of his eye, he saw that the stranger had raised it level with his shoulders and appeared to be peering straight down the length of its tube.

Sanjay barely had time to wonder what Nathan was doing when the monarch breached the surface. A massive wall of flesh, grey on top and white across the bottom, the leviathan shot up from the water only a few rods from the starboard side. Large as the boat itself, its mouth was wide enough to swallow a human whole and lined with rows of serrated teeth. Sanjay caught a glimpse of black eyes, small yet malevolent, and with an angry scream he raised the harpoon in both fores. . . .

It was if a beam of starlight had erupted from the hollow end of Nathan's object, a thin white ray which briefly and silently erased the darkness. It lanced straight into the underside of the monarch's mouth, and for an instant Sanjay saw it reappear within the creature's jaws. A smell like fish being broiled as the beam burned through the monarch's head and heard a loud, agonized groan, then the monarch fell back into the water, making a tremendous splash that threw a wave over the side of the boat.

The monarch was still spasmodically flopping on the surface, its fins and tail thrashing back and forth, when Nathan pointed his weapon—for this was obviously what it was—at it again. Once more, the thin beam cut into the creature's head, this time between the eyes. The monarch jerked and then became still, a dying mass floating on the water.

"A gift from Gal. . . ." Kaile whispered.

"No." For the first time since they'd left shore, Nathan spoke. "Not Gal. A plasma beam rifle."

Sanjay hadn't the slightest idea what he meant by this, but as Nathan turned to him, he suddenly didn't care. Nathan's cloak had fallen open, and now he could see the rest of the stranger's body: forward-jointed legs and slender hinds, a waist that was a little thicker, a neck not as long as his own. The breeze caught the robe and pulled it back from the stranger's shoulders, revealing long-fingered fores that lacked webbing between the digits.

But it was his face that startled Sanjay the most. Except for his red beard, the open nostrils of his nose, and eyes that possessed visible pupils, Nathan's face was nearly the same as that of the teacher.

Kaile whimpered, clutching Sanjay's shoulder in fear. Sanjay stared at the apparition before them, not knowing what to say or do. When he glanced at Aara, though, he saw the calm and knowing smile on her face. She'd been aware of this all along.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"You won't believe this"—Nathan stopped, then corrected himself—"but I hope you eventually will. Sanjay, I'm your cousin."

vii

Nathan refused to say any more about himself for the rest of the journey across the channel. He spent the remaining hours sitting quietly in the bow, rifle propped up on his forward-jointed knees, an enigmatic smile on his face as he politely listened to the younger man prod him with questions. He finally raised a fore and shook his head.

"Enough," he said. "You're just going to have to wait until we reach shore. Once we're there and we meet up with my friends . . ."

"There're more of you?" Sanjay stared at him.

"... then I'll tell you everything you want to know."

"So there're other teachers like you." Kaile was no longer as fearful as she'd been, but she continued to hold tight to Sanjay's fore.

A dry laugh. "I'm not a teacher, and neither are they. We're human, just like you . . . only a bit different, that's all."

"Then why do you look like. . .?"

"Be patient. All will be explained." He then turned away and spoke no more. Sanjay looked at his mother, and Aara silently shook her head. She wouldn't tell them anything either, nor would Teri. They would just have to wait.

Calliope came up a little while later, revealing the mainland before them. By the time the sun was high above the channel, they could clearly make out the black forests that lay beyond the coast, gradually rising to meet the inland mountain range known as the Great Wall. This was the most anyone could see of Cape Exile from Providence, and although it soon stretched across the visible horizon, Sanjay was surprised to see how much the eastern peninsula of Terra Minor resembled Providence. He'd been told since childhood that anyone who dared to approach Purgatory would hear the mournful cries of the banished, but instead the only sound that reached his ears was the screech of seabirds spiraling above the coastal shallows.

And once they were only a couple of kilms away, he saw more than that.

The white sand beach had just become visible when sails came into view, fishing boats plying the offshore waters. The men and women within them raised their fores in greeting as their catamaran sailed past, and Teri did the same in return.

"Wave back," Aara quietly urged her son. "We're among friends."

Sanjay gave her a doubtful look, but did as he was told. He noticed that Nathan made no effort to hide his features or misshapen limbs. His hood remained lowered as he smiled at the fishermen, and although a couple of them stared at him, no one seemed surprised by his appearance, let alone regarded him as an emissary of Gal. Indeed, they treated him as if he was what he'd claimed himself to be: just another person, just one who looked a bit different.

There was no settlement visible from the water, yet canoes and sailboats were lined up on the shore, with nearly as many people around them as there would be on the Providence waterfront. A couple of men waded out to meet their boat; they grasped its sides and pulled it the rest of the way onto the beach, and one of them helped Nathan climb out. As before, Sanjay noticed that Nathan walked with a stiff, almost arthritic gait. It occurred to him that the stranger not only wouldn't walk on all fours, but in fact could not. He always stood on his hinds, and never used his fores for anything except grasping and holding objects. Yet it seemed as if there was a heavy load on his back, for he walked with a perpetual slump, shoulders hunched forward and head slightly bowed.

Aara caught him staring at Nathan, and walked around the beached catamaran to stand beside him. "He was born that way," she murmured, "but he's not a freak of nature. It's not polite to stare."

"He's . . . not from here, is he?" he whispered, and Aara shook her head. "Then where is he from?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Come."

With Kaile walking behind them, Aara led Sanjay from the beach. There were no structures on the shore, yet a trellis gate at the edge of the tree line marked the opening of a raised boardwalk leading into the woods. Nathan was already ahead of them; he'd just reached the gate when a bearded older man emerged from the boardwalk. He rose up on his hinds to greet Nathan; instead of the customary exchange of bows, they clasped each other's right fore, a gesture Sanjay had never seen before. Then he turned to Aara, Sanjay, and Kaile.

"Aara . . . so glad to see that you've returned. Any trouble along the way?"

"Not at all." Apparently Aara didn't think that a close encounter with a monarch was worth mentioning. They exchanged bows, then she raised a fore to Sanjay and Kaile. "Let me introduce my son, Sanjay, and his betrothed, Kaile Otomo . . . it was necessary to bring her along, I'm afraid."

"I'll trust that it was." A kindly smile. "No worries. I'm just happy you managed to get away safely." The older man dropped to all fours to approach Sanjay and Kaile. "Welcome to First Town. I'm Benjam Hallahan, the mayor. Pleased to meet you both."

"An honor to meet you." Sanjay rose to offer a formal bow, as did Kaile. "I'm sorry, but I don't understand . . . where did you say we are?"

"First Town." Benjam's smile became an amused grin. "We don't use the name Purgatory. In fact, it's what this place was called before the Stormyarn. The disciples . . ." He shrugged. "Let's just say for the moment that most of what you were taught is wrong."

Hearing this, Sanjay instinctively glanced about to see if anyone was listening. Aara noticed this and laughed. "Don't worry, there are no guardians here. No deacons, either. In fact, I don't think you'll find any Galianes in First Town."

"We have a shrine," Benjam added, "but only a few people worship there. Mainly older folks who've come here from Providence as exiles and still have trouble accepting the truth."

"What truth is that?" Kaile asked.

Benjam started to reply, then he paused to gaze over his shoulder at Nathan. The stranger shook his head, and the mayor looked back at her and Sanjay again. "That's

a question with a long and difficult answer,” he said, and his smile faded. “I’m afraid some of us have recently learned a few things we ourselves didn’t know before.” His eyes met Sanjay’s. “One of them involves you, my friend.”

“Me? How am I . . . ?”

“Maybe we should find a place where we can speak a little more privately.” When he spoke, Nathan seemed a bit wearier than he’d been before they’d come ashore. “And more comfortably.”

“Of course. You must be exhausted.” Benjam went down on all fours to lead them toward the boardwalk. “This way, please.”

viii

First Town was located deep in the forest, on a low plateau that had been cleared of the surrounding trees. When Sanjay reached the stairs leading to it at the end of the boardwalk, he was amazed by what the forest and adjacent marsh concealed from the channel. The settlement was larger than Childstown and, if anything, more prosperous. The houses and workshops were bigger, more solidly constructed; they had glazed windows and quite a few even had second floors, something he’d never seen before. Elevated aqueducts supplied the town with fresh water from mountain springs; he saw waterwheels turning millstones and lathes, and Benjam told him that a buried network of ceramic pipes fed water into individual homes and businesses. It was the last day of summer, but there seemed to be no anxious rush to prepare for the cold weeks ahead. Townspeople were calmly going about their daily affairs, and there seemed to be no shortage of children playing in the schoolyard.

He’d been expecting a crude camp filled with starving peasants mourning their banishment from Providence, not a contented village inhabited by happy, well-fed people. There was a Galian shrine, just as Benjam said, but it was small and neglected. The genesis plant that grew beside it appeared to be regularly tended, but the plant wasn’t cordoned off by a ring of stones. One look at it, and it was clear that the disciples had little or no authority here.

What was more surprising was a row of pens near the community gardens. Inside them were flocks of what appeared to be large, flightless birds, fat and white, which incessantly clucked and pecked at the soil. Never having seen the like before, Sanjay and Kaile stopped to stare at them, causing the others to come to a halt.

“Chickens,” Benjam said as he walked up behind them. “And those are turkeys.” He pointed to another flock of larger and even fatter birds in another pen. “We raise them for food.”

“Food?” Kaile asked, and Benjam nodded. “Where did you find them? There’s nothing like that on Providence.”

“No, there isn’t. They’re not even indigenous to Eos . . . they came from Earth.”

“Erf?” Sanjay drew back from the pens.

“No . . . *Earth*.” Again, Benjam smiled. “Come. You’ve got a lot to learn.”

Sanjay glanced at Aara. His mother gave him a knowing nod, but said nothing. Yet as they turned to follow Benjam again, Sanjay noticed that, while he and Kaile had been examining the . . . the *chickens* and *turkeys* . . . Nathan had disappeared. Looking around, he saw the stranger walking away, apparently heading for another part of the village. A few passers-by gave him curious glances, but no one seemed to be startled by his appearance. It was obvious that he was known here.

Benjam brought them to a large, slope-sided building near the center of town. Opening its front door, he led them into what appeared to be a meeting hall. With its

carefully arranged rows of mats facing a high rear wall whose stained glass windows formed an abstract pattern, it bore superficial resemblance to a shrine, yet there was no altar, no crèche containing a sleeping teacher, only a low table. The mayor gestured to the front row of mats, and once Sanjay, Kaile, and Aara were seated, he squatted before them in front of the table.

"Nathan will be back soon," he began, speaking to Sanjay and Kaile, "but before he returns, I'll get started by telling you what Aara learned when she came here. Namely, that much of what you grew up accepting as fact is . . . well, to put it bluntly . . . wrong."

"Heresy." Folding her hinds beneath her, Kaile crossed her fores and glared at him.

"No. Not heresy . . . history. History that has been lost to generations of people living on Providence." Benjam paused. "You grew up in a proper Galian household, didn't you?" he asked, and Kaile nodded. "You can't be blamed for believing that anything contrary to the Word of Gal is blasphemous. But you'll have to believe me when I tell you that the Word is a distorted version of what actually occurred many yarn ago, and that the true events are more complex than anything you've been taught."

Kaile scowled and started to rise from her mat, but Sanjay stopped her with his fore. "Let's just listen to what he says. We've come all this way. Maybe it'll explain what you and Aara saw."

Kaile hesitated, then reluctantly sat down again. Benjam let out his breath, then patiently went on. "First, Erf is not what you've been led to believe it is, a nether-world filled with damned souls. It's called Earth, and it's a planet much like Eos, only about one-third smaller. It revolves around a single star called Sol which is much larger and brighter than Calliope . . . it's white, not red, and Earth is much further away from it than Eos is from Calliope."

"Did Gal create sisters for it as well?" Sanjay asked.

Benjam shook his head. "No, there's only that one sun . . . and Gal didn't create either Calliope or Sol, or even Earth or Eos for that matter. They existed long, long before Gal . . . because Gal itself isn't a deity, but rather a vessel created by humans. Our own ancestors, in fact."

Kaile hissed between her teeth. "Blasphemy!"

"Listen to him." Aara glared at her. "He's telling the truth. Go on, Benjam."

"Gal is a vessel . . . what people like Nathan call a starship." Benjam continued. "About 440 sixtyarn ago . . . or years, the way his people reckon time . . . our ancestors built a ship called *Galactique* for the purpose of carrying the seed of men and women to this world, which they knew was capable of sustaining life."

"Why?" Unlike Kaile, Sanjay wasn't upset, but intrigued, by what he was hearing.

"The reasons are complicated." Benjam frowned and shook his head. "I'm not sure I completely understand them myself. Nathan and his companions have told us that *Galactique* was built because the people of that time believed that life on Earth was in peril of being destroyed, and they wanted to assure the survival of the human race." A crooked smile. "It's still there, but it isn't a terrible place filled with tortured souls. The Chosen children, as we call them, were simply the seed of those who'd spent years building the ship. In fact, they resembled Nathan himself . . . those we call the children were altered before birth so that they could live comfortably on Eos, which *Galactique* had changed to make suitable for human life."

"Then Gal . . . I mean, *Galactique*"—Sanjay stumbled over the unfamiliar syllables—"is our creator."

"Just as the Word says," Kaile quietly added.

"*Galactique* created our people, yes, and also the world as we know it . . . but it is not a deity. Those of us here in First Town and the other mainland settlements . . . yes, there are other villages like this one, although not as large . . . knew this even before Nathan and his companions arrived a few weeks ago. People here have long

been aware of the fact that we're descended from the human seed . . . the sperm and eggs, as they call it . . . transported from Earth aboard *Galactique*, and that Eos itself was a much different place before *Galactique* transformed it over the course of nearly 300 sixyarn into the world we know now."

Benjam pointed beyond the open door of the meeting hall. "Those birds you saw, the chickens and turkeys . . . they were brought here, too, in just the same way. In fact, everything else on Eos . . . the forests, the insects, the fruit we eat, the fish in our seas . . . is descended from material carried from Earth by *Galactique*, then altered to make them suitable for life here."

"Nathan calls this 'genetic engineering,'" Aara said, slowly reciting words she herself had apparently learned only recently. "It's really very complicated. I'm not certain I understand it myself."

"It all was done aboard *Galactique* during the time it circled Eos." Benjam nodded in agreement. "Nathan and his people have told us that, during this same time . . . hundreds of yarn, longer than our own history . . . *Galactique* also deposited across Eos dozens of tiny craft called 'biopods,' which in turn contained the genesis plants. Eos was a much different place back then . . . its atmosphere was thin and unbreathable, and the only life here was insignificant . . . lichen and such. The genesis plants were scattered all over Eos, and as they took root and grew to maturity, they absorbed the atmosphere which was already here and replaced it with the air we breathe while also making it thick enough to retain the warmth of Calliope and her sisters. Once that was accomplished, the plants distributed the seeds of all the other plants we know, none of which existed on Eos before *Galactique* came. Other biopods followed them, bringing down the infant forms of fish, birds, insects, and animals which had been gestated aboard the ship. Once they were here . . ."

"Then came you," Nathan said.

He'd entered the room unnoticed, and he wasn't alone. Looking around, Sanjay saw that he was accompanied by a man and a woman, both walking upright on forward-jointed legs and curiously small feet. This time, though, instead of the hooded cloak that had concealed his form on Providence, Nathan wore a strange outfit over his clothes, a jointed framework of pipes and molded plates made of some metallic material that softly whirred and clicked with every move he made. The other two wore similar outfits.

Nathan noticed that Sanjay was staring at him. "It's called an exoskeleton," he said as he walked over to where he and the others were seated. "The surface gravity on Eos . . . the force that causes you to stay on the ground . . . is half-again higher than it is on Earth. Without these to help us stand and move about, we'd get tired very quickly. Our hearts would have to work harder as well, and before long it would be very unhealthy for us to live here. The exoskeletons compensate for this."

Sanjay stood erect to tentatively lay a fore on the exoskeleton's chest plate. It was hard and cool, reminding him somewhat of a scavenger's carapace. "Why weren't you wearing this on Providence?"

"Unfortunately, it doesn't float. If I'd fallen out of the boat, it would have dragged me to the bottom. Leaving it behind was the wisest thing to do." A wry smile. "Fortunately, I'm in pretty good shape. I could handle the stress for a little while." Nathan turned to the two who'd walked in with him. "Let me introduce my companions. This is Marilyn Sanyal, and he's Russell Coyne. Like myself, they're related to people you may already know. . . ."

"I have a friend named Johan Sanyal. And my father's family name is Coyne."

"Is it really?" Russell appeared to be Sanjay's age, differences notwithstanding. He grinned as he extended an oddly shaped fore, then apparently thought better of it and bowed instead. "I believe that makes us relatives."

Sanjay didn't return the bow. Instead, he looked at Nathan. "You said on the boat that you and I are cousins. Are you also . . . ?"

"Even more so than Russell, yes. My last name is Arkwright . . . Nathan Arkwright II." He raised a fore before Sanjay could ask another question. "There's a lot of complicated family history involved here, but you should know that we both bear the last name of the person who was responsible for *Galactique* in the first place, and I was given his first name as well." He touched his hair, then pointed to Sanjay's. "Same hair color, in fact . . . it's hereditary."

"So you're telling us that Sanjay comes from the seed of someone on Erf who was brought here by Gal . . ." Kaile began.

"No." Nathan turned to her. "Not the way you're saying it, at least. As Benjam just told you, Erf is a world called Earth, and Gal is a starship called *Galactique* that's still in orbit above Eos. Over time, their names were shortened, just as their true nature has been forgotten."

"Otherwise, you've got it right." Marilyn appeared to be a little older than Kaile, although not quite as old as Aara. Of the three, she alone had skin the same dark shade as the native inhabitants; the others were nearly as pale as the teacher. "What's your family name, if I may ask?"

Kaile hesitated. "Otomo."

Marilyn pulled a small flat object from a pocket in the clothes she wore beneath the exoskeleton. Holding the object in her left fore, she tapped her finger a few times against it, then studied it for a moment. "There was a Katsumi Otomo among those who built *Galactique*," she said. "A propulsion engineer . . . never mind what that means. She was your ancestor . . . one of them, at least."

"Everyone you know, everyone on this world, is descended from at least two of the two hundred men and women who contributed reproductive material to *Galactique*'s gene pool," Russell said. "First, the ship distributed genesis plants across the planet, which in turn introduced cyanobacteria into the atmosphere to reduce the carbon dioxide content, raise the oxygen-nitrogen ratio, and thereby make Eos human-habitable through ecopoiesis. . . ."

"Russ . . . don't get technical," Nathan said quietly. "They're not ready for that yet." Russell nodded, albeit reluctantly, and Nathan went on. "The point is, although we don't look alike, we're humans just as you are. *Galactique* altered the embryonic forms of your immediate ancestors so that they could survive this planet's higher gravity while also making them amphibious. . . ."

"And you're telling me not to get technical," Russell said, raising an eyebrow.

"So the Word is correct," Kaile said. "Even if what you say is true, it still means that Gal is our creator."

Nathan shared an uncertain glance with Russell and Marilyn. "Well . . . yes, I suppose you could say that, but not in the sense you mean."

"But she's in our sky every day and every night, watching every move we make." Kaile remained adamant. "She's been there for as long as our mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers. . . ."

"A matriarchal mythology as well as a society," Marilyn said softly. "Interesting."

Nathan ignored her. "Once humans were brought down here, *Galactique* moved into a geosynchronous orbit"—he caught himself—"a place in the sky which is always above the same place on the ground, where it was supposed to function as a . . . um, a source of information for the original colony. That's why you can see it all the time. It rotates at the same angular velocity as Eos, so it's always directly above you."

Russell picked up the thread. "The ship also carried with it two . . . ah, artificial beings, what we call robots . . . which were meant to be your instructors. They raised the first children who came here, teaching them how to survive. . . ."

"You mean the teacher . . . there were two?" Sanjay said.

"Yes, there were." Benjam had been quiet for a while; now he spoke up. "There was one here in First Town like the one in Provincetown, along with another transformer." He looked over at Russell. "Which, as you say, manufactured from blocks of the material we call Galmatter the first tools used by our people."

"Correct." Russell was obviously relieved that someone here understood what he'd been trying to explain. "The transformers are what we call three-dimensional laser manufacturers. They took information stored within *Galactique's* data library and . . ." He caught a stern look from Nathan. "Damn . . . I'm doing it again, aren't I?"

Nathan nodded, then spoke to Sanjay once more. "The teachers, the transformers, the stuff you call Galmatter . . . they were all sent down here to help the original colonists . . . the ones you call the Chosen children . . . grow up and survive in their new home. But then, there was an accident. . . ."

"Enough." Kaile raised her fores in protest. "You tell us these things and ask that we believe them, but you offer no proof." She cast an angry glare at Nathan. "Perhaps you've managed to fill their minds with lies. . . ."

"We're not lying," Nathan said, his voice flat and steady.

". . . but I refuse to accept what you're saying on your word alone. Prove it!"

No one said anything for a moment. Then Benjam stood up. "I'll give you proof. Something that's been here since the beginning of our history, which we've long accepted as evidence that life began out there."

"And you'll also see what caused that light you saw in the sky," Nathan added. Marilyn opened her mouth as if to object, but he shook his head. "No, she needs to see this. It's the only way."

"Follow me," Benjam said, then dropped to all fours and began to walk toward the door.

ix

Another path, on the far end of town, led uphill into the dense forest at the base of the mountains. As Benjam led the group through the black woodlands, Nathan picked up where he'd left off in the meeting hall.

"First Town was the original colony, and for the first few years . . . um, sixtyarns . . . it was the only settlement. During this time, the teachers nurtured the hundred children who'd been gestated and born aboard *Galactique* . . . building shelters for them, providing them with food from the mockapples, roseberries, and melonvines that they cultivated, and educating them as they raised them from infancy to childhood. It helped a great deal that Eos has very short seasons. Unlike Earth, your winters last only three weeks, and in the equatorial region are relatively mild. . . ."

"Have you ever seen snow?" Marilyn asked.

Sanjay and Kaile shook their heads. "What's that?" Sanjay asked.

"It's . . . um . . ."

"Don't interrupt," Nathan said to Marilyn. She grinned and became silent, and he went on. "The colony was approaching self-sufficiency when an unforeseen occurrence happened, one that changed everything . . . your sun, Calliope, underwent a variable phase."

"Calliope is what's known as a red dwarf." As Russell spoke, he turned to walk backward on his curiously shaped hinds. Sanjay was amazed by the improbable and yet so casual movement, but Russell didn't seem to notice the way Sanjay stared at him. "They're generally smaller and cooler than Earth's sun, but every now and then

... every few thousand years or so ... they tend to spontaneously enter phases in which they grow hotter and brighter due to solar prominences. ..."

"Russell ..." Again, Nathan seemed concerned that Sanjay and Kaile wouldn't understand him.

"No, don't stop," Sanjay said. "I think I understand what you're saying."

"You do?" Russell said. Sanjay nodded, and after a moment Kaile reluctantly did as well. "All right then ... anyway, when Calliope started to undergo one of these variable phases, *Galactique* detected the change that was about to occur. . ."

"Of course she did," Kaile said. "Gal knows all and sees all."

Marilyn sighed, shook her head. "Please try to understand ... Gal isn't a deity. It's a machine." Seeing the confused expression on the young woman's face, she tried again. "It's like a tool, just far more complicated than anything you've ever seen. One of the things it can do is think and reason for itself, just as you can."

"This tool has a mind?" Even Aara was startled by this revelation.

"Of a sort, yes." This time, Russell made a stronger effort to speak in terms the islanders could understand. "Not exactly like your own, but ... yes, it can observe, gather facts, and make its own decisions. *Galactique* also provided the teachers with information and instructions, just as it provided the transformers with their own instructions."

"Unfortunately, it can also make mistakes." Nathan had become pensive. He walked with his head down, gazing at the ground as he spoke. "When it saw that Calliope was entering a variable phase, it calculated the probable effects upon the planetary climate and realized that severe storms ... typhoons, we call them ... would occur in this region. The colonists were still quite young, and the settlement had been established in a coastal area that would probably experience high winds, flooding, perhaps even forest fires. . ."

"The Great Storm," Sanjay said.

"We know all about that." A vindicated smile appeared on Kaile's face. "This was when Gal separated those who believed in her and took them to Providence, leaving behind those who'd sinned."

"Again, you're only half-right." As Nathan said this, Sanjay could tell that he was trying to be patient. "It wasn't a matter of who'd sinned and who hadn't. *Galactique* determined that the odds of survival would be increased if the colony were divided, with half of the children sent elsewhere while the other half remained here to protect the settlement. So it instructed the teachers to build boats to take fifty children to the nearby island, whose western coast *Galactique* calculated would be less vulnerable to storm-surges from the east, where they would remain until the variable phase came to an end and the climate restabilized."

"My ancestors were among the fifty who stayed here." Benjam walked slowly, turning his head to Kaile and Sanjay. "They were given a teacher and one of the transformers, just as your ancestors were, and then they relocated to higher ground away from the beach ... the place where First Town stands today."

"It was supposed to be only temporary," Marilyn said, "but then ..."

"We're here," Benjam said.

The path came to an end in a clearing where the slope was level and only chest-high grass and clumps of dreamer's weed grew. From its center rose a tall object, off-white and partially covered with vines, that Sanjay first took to be a large, tooth-shaped boulder tilted slightly to one side. As they walked a little closer, he saw that it wasn't a natural object at all. Darkened on the bottom, tapering upward as a conical shape with mysterious markings along its sides, it had a round opening midway up, a rope ladder dangling from it.

Whatever it was, clearly it had been made by human fores.

"This is where it all began." Benjam stopped and stood erect. "This is the craft in which all our ancestors were brought down to the surface."

Nathan pointed to dark blue markings along its upper surface, just visible through the clinging vines. "See? G . . . A . . . L . . ." He shrugged. "The rest got rubbed off some way or another."

"Probably atmospheric friction during entry and landing," Russell said. "Sun and rain, too. Still, it's in amazing condition, considering how long it's been here."

Walking a little closer, Sanjay rose on his hinds to peer in the direction Nathan was pointing. All he saw was something that looked like a snail, something that looked a little like a harpoon tip, and a right angle. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You can't see that?" Marilyn asked. "How can you not. . . ?" Then she stopped and stared at him. "Oh, my god . . . you can't read, can you?"

"No," Benjam said quietly. "For the islanders, Inglis . . . what they call English . . . is entirely a phonetic language, with no written counterpart." He regarded Sanjay and Kaile with a pitying expression. "The children who were sent to Providence lost their ability to read and write when their teacher was disabled and they lost communications with *Galactique*. It's the main reason why their understanding of history became diluted by myth."

"Oral history," Marilyn nodded with sudden understanding. "Unwritten, malleable, and all too easy to be misunderstood. Everything they know, or they think they know, has been . . ."

"What are you saying?" Sanjay glared at them, annoyed by their condescension but also confused. "Are you trying to tell us that everything the deacons have told us is . . . is. . . ?"

"Wrong," Nathan said, finishing his thought for him. "I'm sorry, but that's what we've been trying to explain." Stepping past Benjam, he slowly walked through the high grass, approaching the craft as respectfully as if it was a shrine. "You wanted proof," he said over his shoulder to Kaile. "Well, here it is. Want to come closer and see?"

Kaile hesitated. Then, visibly shaken but nonetheless curious, she followed Nathan and Benjam, walking on her hinds so that she could see the craft more clearly. Sanjay and Aara fell in behind her, with Russell and Marilyn following them. As the group made their way across the clearing, Nathan continued.

"When our ship arrived a few weeks ago . . . that's the light your mother saw, Sanjay . . . one of the first things we did was rendezvous with *Galactique* and access its memory . . . talk to it, if you will. We learned a lot of what had happened here over the last hundred and sixty years . . . sixtyarn, I mean . . . but there were still some mysteries that remained unsolved until we came here and made contact with Benjam and his people."

"By then, I'd been told the truth as well," Aara said quietly, looking at Sanjay. "Like everyone who's been exiled here, the first thing that I learned was how wrong the disciples are. Our whole history, everything we know . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Nathan continued to speak. "One of the worst effects . . . in fact, probably the single worst effect . . . of Calliope's variable phase was the enormous electromagnetic surge that occurred during its peak." He glanced over his shoulder at Sanjay and Kaile. "I know you're not going to understand this, so I'll try to make it simple . . . stars like Calliope emit more than just heat and light. They also cast other forms of radiation that you can't hear, see, or feel, but which are present anyway. The radiation became so intense that it not only destroyed *Galactique's* ability to . . . um, talk to the teachers and the transformers, but also even the islanders' ability to communicate with those who stayed on the mainland."

"We didn't lose our teacher the way you did," Benjam explained, "because it took shelter within this craft, which has adequate shielding to resist against this intense radiation. So we still had the means by which to learn the things we needed to know, including our history and origins. But our transformer was destroyed, as well as the high gain antenna. Those had been built up and couldn't be deconstructed in time."

"Almost all electrical technology was lost," Russell said. "Except for the emergency radio beacon . . . that was inside the lander, where it runs off a nuclear power cell. Once we learned its frequency from *Galactique*, we were able to use it to figure out where this colony was located."

"That's the light you saw, Kaile," Aara said.

Kaile said nothing. By then, the group had reached the landing craft. Over forty rods tall, Sanjay could now see that it was made entirely of metal, its paint chipped and faded with age. The opening midway up its flank was a hatch from which a ladder made of woven vine and bamboo had been draped.

"The children who'd been taken to Providence remained there," Benjam said. "Their teacher and transformer ceased to function and they lost contact with those who'd been left behind. By the time the Great Storm finally ended four years later, they'd come to believe everyone there was dead. Without a teacher to lead them, much of their knowledge was lost. They couldn't even cross the channel without risking being killed by monarchs. . . ."

"What we call great white sharks back on Earth," Marilyn added. "Like everything else, they've been adapted to provide Eos with a diverse ecosystem. Unfortunately, they also became a barrier between the two colonies."

"So the colony on Providence formed its own culture," Benjam continued, "without the benefit of written language or history or even science. In time, their children and children's children came to believe in Gal, but here"—he laid a fore against the lander's hull—"we didn't lose those things. Before our own teacher ceased to function, it taught our grandparents all that we needed to know. By the time they were ready to build boats and try to restore contact with those who lived on the island, the disciples had made anything contrary to the Word of Gal . . . *Galactique's* final instructions to the island colony, passed down by word of mouth over the years, all the time being reinterpreted and misunderstood . . . an act of heresy. Even trying to come over could get us killed. All we could do was stay away and accept those your people banished. Do you see?"

"Yes," Sanjay said.

"No," Kaile said. "All I see is something left to us by Gal. It could be anything but what you say it is."

"Kaile . . ." Aara shook her head, more disappointed than angry. "Everything they've told you is true."

"If you still don't believe us, go in and see for yourself." Benjam tugged at the bottom of the ladder. "Here . . . climb up and look."

Sanjay didn't hesitate. Taking the ladder from him, he grasped the rungs with his fores and carefully began to climb upward. As Nathan took the ladder to follow him, Sanjay paused to look back down. Kaile was still standing on the ground; when she caught his eye, she reluctantly began to scale the ladder herself.

The compartment on the other side of the hatch was dark. As Sanjay crawled through the hatch, he found that he could see very little. There was a gridded metal floor beneath his fores and hinds, and some large oval objects clustered along the circular walls, but that was almost all he could make out. Nathan came in behind him, and Sanjay was startled by a beam of light from a small cylinder he'd pulled from his pocket. But this was nothing compared to the shock he felt when the bright circle fell upon an object on the far side of the compartment.

"A teacher!" Kaile had just entered the craft. She crouched beside the open hatch, staring at what Nathan's light revealed.

Sanjay felt his heart pound as he stared at the solitary figure seated in a chair in front of what appeared to be some sort of glass-topped desk. Like the teacher in Childstown, it had a featureless face and oddly formed limbs; this one, though, wore a loose, single-piece outfit that had moldered and rotted over time, exposing the grey and mottled skin beneath. Yet the teacher's eyes were as blank as those of his long-lost companion, and it was obvious that it, too, hadn't moved in many years.

"Benjam tells me it managed to survive the solar storm." Nathan's voice was quiet, almost reverent as Sanjay crouched beside the teacher. "It took refuge in here, and that's how it was able to remain active long after the one you have on the island became inert."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Sanjay continued to peer at the teacher. He prodded its face with a fingertip, something he'd always wanted to do with the one in Childstown. The Galmatter felt nothing like human flesh, or indeed like anything that had ever lived.

"I know. I'm sorry. It's going to take a while for you to . . ." Nathan stopped himself. "Anyway, here's something else you need to see." He looked back at Kaile. "Come closer. You ought to see this, too."

"No. I'm staying where I am." She wouldn't budge from the hatch. Sanjay could tell that she was frightened.

"Suit yourself." Keeping his head down so as not to bang it against the low ceiling, Nathan came further into the compartment. "Look at these, Sanjay," he said, running the light beam across the ovoid shapes arranged along the walls. "What do you think they look like?"

Sanjay approached the egg-like objects and examined them. Although they were covered with dust, he could see that their top halves were transparent, made of a substance that looked like glass, but resembled Galmatter. Raising a fore to one of them, he gently wiped away the dust. Nathan brought his light a little closer, and Sanjay saw that within the cell was a tiny bed, its covers long since decayed yet nonetheless molded in such a way that would accommodate an infant.

"They look like cradles," he murmured.

"Exactly. They're cradles . . . meant to carry down from orbit one hundred newborn babies." Nathan shined the light upward, and Sanjay looked up to see an open hatch in the ceiling. "There are three more decks just like this one above us, and two of them contain cradles, along with places for all the equipment that was transported here from Earth. But the babies were the most important cargo."

Returning the light to the cradle Sanjay had been inspecting, Nathan reached past him to tap a finger against a small panel on its transparent cover. "You can't read what this says, I know, but it's a name . . . 'Gleason.' That's the last name of the child who was in this particular egg, and it's also the last name of the person who donated their reproductive material to *Galactique's* gene pool. All of these cradles have names on them, and I bet that if you went through the lander and looked at them, you'd find the last names of everyone you know . . . except one. And you know who that is?"

"No."

"Yours."

Sanjay turned to look at him. "I don't understand. You said . . ."

"There's no cradle here with the name of Arkwright, but that doesn't mean our common ancestor wasn't aboard the lander. These names were put on the cradles before *Galactique* left Earth, and the Arkwright genome . . . our family, that is . . . is supposed to be represented by the Morressy genome. But there are no cradles here

labeled Morressy, which means something else unforeseen happened after *Galactique* arrived. And that's why your mother and I came to find you."

"What was it?"

Nathan didn't respond at once. "I could tell you, but . . . maybe you ought to hear this for yourself." He turned around to look at Kaile. "Do you still not trust me?" he asked, not in an unkindly way but rather with great patience. "Do you still think all this was performed by some all-powerful deity?"

Kaile was quiet. Her gaze traveled around the compartment, taking it all in. Then she said, softly yet with determination, "I believe in Gal."

"Very well . . . then let's go meet Gal."

x

From space, Eos looked like nothing Sanjay had ever imagined. His people knew that they lived on a planet, of course; no one but small children thought the world was flat. But since only the deacons saw the global maps dating back before the Stormyarn—one more aspect of their history lost to Galian superstition—his people's knowledge of the place where they lived was limited to Providence, the Western Channel, and Cape Exile.

So he was unable to look away from the windows of the winged craft that had carried him, Kaile, Nathan, and Marilyn into space. On the other side, an immense blue hemisphere stretched as far as the eye could see, its oceans broken by dark-hued land masses, its mountains and deserts shadowed by gauzy white clouds. The world slowly revolved beneath them, so enormous that he could barely believe that it could even exist.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Marilyn spoke quietly from the right front seat of the spacecraft she and Nathan had led Sanjay and Kaile through the forest to find. It had been left in a meadow about a half-kilm from *Galactique's* lander, where the expedition's contact team had touched down three weeks ago.

"Yes . . . yes, it is." Sanjay could barely speak. Fascination had overcome the terror of lift-off, the noise and vibration of the swift ascent, the invisible pressure that had pushed Kaile and him into soft couches barely suitable for their bodies despite the changes Nathan had made to accommodate them (during which Sanjay learned that the visitors had other words for their fores and hinds: *hands* and *feet*). The pressure was gone, and now his body felt utterly without weight, as if he was floating on the sea except without having to make any effort to stay buoyant; only the straps kept him in his seat. "Never thought it was . . . so big."

"Eos is about eighty-five hundred kilometers in radius and seventeen thousand kilometers in diameter." Nathan didn't look away from the yoke-like control bar in his lap. "Kilometers are what you call kilms. Anyway, it's about one-third larger than Earth, but just a little more than one-fifth of the distance Earth is from Sol . . . about .2 AU's, but you don't need to worry about that. The important thing is that it's not rotation-locked, which helped make it habitable."

Sanjay looked over at Kaile. She'd closed her eyes the moment the spacecraft had left the ground and had kept them closed all the way up, but now she'd opened them again and was staring at Eos with both awe and dread. She clutched the too-short armrests, and when Sanjay reached over to lay a fore across hers, she barely noticed.

"And you say it . . . it wasn't always like this?" she asked, her voice barely more a whisper.

"No. Before *Galactique* arrived and began dropping its biopods, Eos was a hot and largely lifeless world. The oceans were there, but they were almost sterile, and what little life existed on the surface was . . . well, very small and very primitive. The biopods and genesis plants changed all that, and very quickly, too . . . just a little less than three centuries." Again, Nathan glanced over his shoulder. "That's about eight-hundred hundred years by your reckoning. A very short time . . . but then, your seasons are so much shorter, so it just seems long to you."

"And you say you came here in another craft?" Sanjay asked. "One that's bigger than this?"

"Oh, yes, much larger." Marilyn reached forward to press her fingers against a row of buttons between her and Nathan, and a moment later a small glass plate above the buttons lit up to reveal a picture of something that looked like a sphere with a long, ribbed cylinder jutting from one end. "That's our ship . . . the *Neil DeGrasse Tyson*. It's about six hundred meters long . . . a meter is about the same length as your rod . . . and there's over two hundred people aboard. It took more than sixty-seven years for us to get here. . . ."

"That long?" Sanjay was becoming accustomed to their way of counting the time.

"Yes, but we slept most of the way, so . . ."

"You *slept*? How did you. . . ?"

"It's rather complicated." Marilyn shook her head. "Anyway, it's on the other side of the planet, where it can't be seen from Providence, but that's what your mother saw . . . its main engine firing to decelerate." Again, she let out her breath in frustration as she gave Nathan a helpless look. "I never thought I'd have to explain so much."

"No one did," Nathan murmured.

"Where is Gal?" Kaile asked abruptly. "You said we could meet her. So where is she?"

Her expression had tightened, her eyes no longer filled with wonder. She had endured enough already; now she wanted to see what she'd been promised, the face of her creator. Sanjay was almost embarrassed for her. He'd become convinced that what Nathan and Marilyn had told them was the truth, but Kaile remained stubborn in her beliefs.

"Just ahead," Marilyn pointed. "There . . . look."

Stretching forward as much as he could against the straps, Sanjay peered through the bubble. At first he saw nothing but stars, then something came into view, a small, bright dash of light that twinkled in the sun. It steadily grew larger, gradually gaining shape and form.

"It was much larger when it left Earth," Nathan said as he guided their craft closer. "It once had a sail larger than Providence, but that was discarded once it reached Eos. The lander we visited was once attached as well. Now there's only this."

Hovering before them, slowly tumbling through the night, was a slender, cylindrical object about a hundred rods in length. Sunlight was reflected from its silver hull, and what looked like sticks, dishes, and barrels stuck out here and there. In no way did it look like a deity, though, or in fact like anything except a toy some imaginative child might have cobbled together from discarded household implements.

"This is Gal?" Kaile's eyes were wide, her voice weak.

"This is what you call Gal." Marilyn was apologetic. "I'm sorry, Kaile, but . . . yes, this is all there is."

Sanjay looked down at Eos again. It took him a few moments to recognize the shapes of the landmasses that lay below, but the finger-shaped peninsula protruding from the northeast corner of an equatorial continent was probably Cape Exile . . . that meant that the large island just off its coast was Providence. Calliope was beginning to set to the west, which meant that anyone looking straight up from the island would see the very same thing they looking at.

"He's telling the truth." Sanjay's mouth was dry as he turned to Kaile. "We're above Childstown." He pointed through the windows. "This is what we've seen whenever we've looked at the sky."

Kaile didn't speak, but when she peered in the direction he was pointing, her face became ashen. "Now I want you to hear something, Sanjay." Nathan said as he did something with his controls that caused the yoke to lock in place, then bent forward to push more buttons. "Many, many years ago, while *Galactique* was on its way here, one of your ancestors on Earth sent a message. Her name was Dhanishta, and her father Matt helped her send this to *Galactique*. The ship received the message and stored it in memory, and we found it when we arrived. Here's what Dhani had to say. . . ."

The glass panel lit again, this time to display a child's face: a little girl, probably no older than seven or eight sixyarn, as dark-skinned as any islander but with a yellow flower in her long black hair. She was sitting upright in a chair, smiling brightly, and as Sanjay watched, she began to speak:

"Hello, Sanjay. My name is Dhanishta Arkwright Skinner, and I'm calling you from Earth." The image was grainy and occasionally shot through with thin white lines. The girl's cheerful voice had a blurred tone to it, but nonetheless her words were distinct. *"I know you're still asleep and so it will be many years before you see this, but when Galactique finally gets to Eos, I hope you will."* A slight pause; she looked flustered. *"I mean, I hope you'll see this. Anyway, I wish I were there with you, because I'd love to know what the new world looks like. I hope it's as nice as Earth and that you'll have a great time there. Please think of me always, and remember that you have a friend here. Much love, Dhani."*

The girl stopped speaking. She blinked, then looked away. *"Is that okay? Did I . . . ?"* Then the glass panel went dark.

Sanjay didn't know what to say. He couldn't tell which astonished him more, the fact that he could see and hear a little girl speaking to him from across the worlds and yarn, or what she'd said. When he raised his eyes again, he found both Nathan and Marilyn smiling at him.

"She said her name is Arkwright," he said.

"That's correct." Nathan nodded. "Dhanishta Arkwright Skinner . . . Arkwright is her middle name. She's your ancestor. Mine, too."

"But how did . . . how did she know I was here?"

"When she was much older," Marilyn said, "Dhani wrote her memoirs . . . her life story. She explained that Matt Skinner, her father, had told her that there was a little boy named Sanjay aboard *Galactique*, and let her send that message to him."

"But the little boy didn't really exist," Nathan continued, "so her father sent another message to *Galactique*, telling its AI . . . its machine-mind . . . to alter its original instructions. As I said, many of the people who helped build *Galactique* were allowed to contribute eggs and sperm that'd later become the original colonists . . . the people you've called the Chosen children. One of them was a woman named Kate Morressy, who was Dhanishta's great-grandmother and also the granddaughter of Nathan Arkwright."

"The person you're named after."

"Correct. Well, without telling anyone, Matt instructed the AI to rename that particular genome 'Arkwright' instead of 'Morressy,' and that its first offspring was to be a male child named Sanjay."

"He did this as a gift for his daughter, but never told her about it," Marilyn said. "In fact, we didn't know about it either until we reached *Galactique* and downloaded . . . I mean, listened to . . . its AI."

"My great-great-grandfather's name was Sanjay Arkwright." Sanjay could barely speak; his voice came out as a dry-throated croak. "He was one of the Chosen children."

"That was the little boy Dhani imagined was aboard *Galactique*," Marilyn said. "He never heard it, though, so in a way, the message was meant for you."

Something small and wet touched Sanjay's face. Reaching up to brush away the moisture, he looked over at Kaile and realized that she was crying. Her tears didn't roll down her cheeks, though, but instead floated away as tiny, glistening bubbles.

"Do you believe us now?" Marilyn asked, quietly and with great sympathy.

Kaile didn't say anything. She simply nodded, and continued to weep for the god who'd just died. "Yes . . . yes, I think we do," Sanjay said quietly. "So what do we do now?"

Nathan and Marilyn looked at each other. For once, they were the ones who were at a loss for words. "That's up to you," Nathan said quietly. "What do you think we should do?"

Sanjay gazed out the window for a little while. "I think I know," he said at last.

xi

The craft shook violently as its wings bit into the atmosphere, and for several minutes its canopy was enveloped by a reddish-orange corona. Sanjay clenched his teeth and held Kaile's fore tight within his own; he felt weight returning, and regretted losing the brief euphoria he'd experienced high above Eos. Nathan had warned them that returning to the ground would be like this, but it didn't make it any less frightening. He just hoped it would be over soon . . . although he wasn't looking forward to what was coming next.

The trembling gradually subsided and the corona faded, revealing the darkening blue sky of early evening. Through the canopy windows, the ocean came into view; Aether and Baachae were coming up over the horizon, and Sanjay gazed at them in wonder, understanding now that they weren't really sisters but instead two dwarf stars just like Calliope, the three suns sharing the same center of gravity.

Indeed, everything familiar seemed new again. Eos, his people, their place in history, even Gal . . . no, *Galactique* . . . itself. What had once been the works of an all-powerful creator, he now understood to be something different, small yet significant aspects of a vast but knowable universe.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Although Nathan didn't look away from his controls, Sanjay knew that he was speaking to him and Kaile. "You can always change your mind, y'know."

"I'm not sure we're doing the right thing," Marilyn spoke to Nathan, ignoring the passengers seated behind them. "It's a primitive culture. The shock . . . maybe we should take this slowly, introduce it over time. . . ."

"No." Just as Sanjay was feeling weight return to his body, so he also felt the responsibility of telling others what he'd learned. "My father, my friends, even the disciples . . . they have to know the truth." He glanced at Kaile. "Yes?"

She lay back in her seat, gazing through the windows. "Yes," she said at last, turning her face toward his to give him an uncertain smile. "They won't like it, but . . . they deserve to know what everyone in Purgatory already knows."

Nathan nodded, then looked at Marilyn. "Very well, then," he said, letting out his breath. "We're go for touchdown."

"Make it the beach," Sanjay said. "Plenty of room there."

Far below, Providence was coming into view. The last light of day was touching the thin white strip of its coast, and although he still couldn't make out Childstown, he knew that those who lived there had probably seen the bright star descending from the sky and the bird-like object it had become. The bell in the watchtower was being

rung, and townspeople were emerging from their homes and workshops to stare up at the strange thing descending upon them.

He smiled to himself, imaging R'beca's reaction when she saw the craft alight upon the waterfront and witnessed who would emerge from it. Soon, there would be no more heretics. Another thought amused him and he laughed out loud.

Kaile looked at him sharply. "What's so funny?"

"I'm going to be busy soon," he replied. "We're going to need more boats."

Puzzled, Kaile shook her head. Sanjay didn't explain what he meant, though, but instead gazed up at the sky. *Galactique* was there, as it had always been, but he now knew that its long journey had finally come to an end. . . .

And another journey was about to begin. ○

NEXT ISSUE

JUNE ISSUE

Our June 2015 issue is filled with bloodshed and music, ghosts and aliens, and much more. **Django Wexler's** first story for *Asimov's* takes an exciting look at the battles that lead up to "The End of the War." In her novella, "Our Lady of the Open Road," award winning author **Sarah Pinsker** sings a heartfelt paean to the future of musicians and the touring band.

ALSO IN JUNE

A different kind of battle rages in **Henry Lien's** novelette about the headstrong members of "The Ladies' Underwater Gardening Society"; **M. Bennardo** takes us back to prehistoric time for an encounter with "Ghosts of the Savannah"; **Indrapramit Das** explains little about aliens, but just enough about "The Muses of Shuyedan-18"; and new author **Ray Nayler** examines the "Mutability" of memory in the distant future.

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Better late than never, **Robert Silverberg** Reflections readies us for "The World to End Last Month"; **Peter Heck's** On Books reviews works by George R.R. Martin and Gardner Dozois, Harry Harrison, and others; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net tells the "Optimist's Tale"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our June issue on sale at newsstands on April 21, 2015. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com's* Kindle and Kindle Fire, and *Barnes and Noble.com's* Nook, as well as from magzter.com/magazines, Google Play, and Kobo's digital newsstand!

BASEMENT REFRIGERATOR

—AFTER THOMAS LUX

More like a mausoleum—you tug the handle
and on the shelves: not much
and what there is (a jug of milk
half full, five cans of Schlitz)
looks imprisoned, dusty, inedible.
But tucked in the corner, a temptation green,
cloudy green, science green, lit-from-within green,
shining green in its liquid: a brain
in a jar. Two-thirds full, omniscient
organ, like an astrophysicist
lecturing to a crowd of high school dropouts.
The same jar always present
through childhood leftovers—gray stew,
limp asparagus, and cold milk.

Maybe it came over from the old country,
a priceless relic of some forgotten saint,
or was a gift received at an office party
from a boss who wanted to be more creative
than a fruit basket. Perhaps,
it is an inherited curse,
like male pattern baldness or sickle cell anemia,
passed from my grandfather,
to my father,
to, in some cold future, me,
then my son.

It was tremendous
and, if I never talked to it,
it was because I was afraid it might talk back
or because I was afraid it might not,
and because you do not speak
to that which chills the heart with awe.

—Joshua Gage



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As reported here at the time, more than a decade ago, sitting in a café in Paris, a friend of a friend insisted to me that “science fiction was over” as literature. When I protested, he explained that science fiction was an historical literary movement, which like all literary movements, arose out of specific macrocultural conditions in a specific historical era. Therefore, like all historical literary movements, it had a beginning, a length of duration, and an end to its literary and cultural relevance, and science fiction had reached that end point and was going to fade away.

I didn’t buy into the concept in general then, and specifically as applied to a dirge for science fiction, but I’m beginning to wonder about it now.

As a literary critic for this magazine, I get a steady stream, sometimes verging on a tsunami, of novels and collections published by SF genre lines. Over the past few years, the overwhelming majority of them I automatically dismiss as

the sort of stuff I would never think of reading for pure pleasure, let alone reading for possible consideration in these columns.

When I started writing these columns decades ago, I conceived of my mission as reviewing “science fiction” and/or “speculative fiction,” which I more or less considered alternate terms for the same thing. At that historical point, “SF” was simply a convenient shorthand and logo.

Gradually, though, fantasy began to be published in the same genre imprints under the same “SF” logo for strictly commercial reasons, even though, literally speaking, they were not at all the same things—“science fiction” or “speculative fiction” by literary definition being fiction that required a speculative element that was possible though presently nonexistent but nothing known to be impossible, and fantasy being a fiction that required an element of the impossible in order to be fantasy.

At the time, there was a great debate among the membership of the then Science Fiction Writers of America as to whether or not works of fantasy should be eligible for the Nebula Award or count as credentials toward membership. I leaned more to the purist side at the time, at least when it came to what sort of fiction I should be reviewing.

But gradually, over considerable time, as the Science Fiction Writers of America was officially morphing into the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, in reality as the SF Writers of America, as literary fantasy was becoming a significant part of genre SF publication and then at the very least co-dominant, as the best fantasy became more literarily interesting and sophisticated, at least to me, and the border between

things like post-modern space opera and fantasy, between fantasy and magic realism, became more blurry, and crossovers to some extent became where the literary action was intriguing, I broadened my literary interests as a reader or had them broadened for me, and therefore my critical horizons as to what I would consider writing about in these columns.

Cutting back to the chase—that is to the current situation, to what I only now am seeing with eyes wide open—I have gradually come to the awful and awfully depressing realization that the overwhelming majority of what I am receiving for review from genre SF lines is fantasy, and most of it is schlock. And so is the majority of what remains of genre science fiction.

There, I've said it. Most of what is now being published as SF is schlock.

Do I have to define schlock? Or at least what I mean by schlock?

I suppose I do.

By schlock I mean fiction that is conceived from the git-go as commercial product. By schlock I mean fiction that is conceived as such without literary, cultural, political, characterological, spiritual, or psychological intent or passion. By schlock I mean all tie-ins to media “franchises”; TV series, movie series, comic book superheroes, toys, video games, ad nauseum, ad infinitum.

By schlock, I mean first novels that are written from the git-go to launch an open-ended novel series, now openly advertised, referred to, and commercially designed as “franchises” themselves.

Now, this is admittedly not the moral equivalent of child molesting or Bernie Madoff. This has long been the condition of television. The open-ended cinematic franchises of Marvel and Disney and lesser movie production companies, using their film series to gorge their bottom lines on the toys, books, games, costumes, fast food, clothing, theme park rides, and much more even if the series flop, have now made it the dominant condition of feature films, too. Just good—if utterly ruthless and cynical—business.

For the bottom line is that schlock sells. Schlock sells better than any art aspiring to anything beyond the bottom line no matter the art form because it is designed, promoted, and advertised to do just that. In this century, the production and marketing of schlock, while it may not be an art form, is most certainly a sophisticated science.

So why should nonmedia “Science Fiction” or “SF” or “Sci-Fi” or “SyFy” or whatever other moniker you want to pin on this genre be immune from the schlockification?

Well, arguments can certainly be made that for artistic and cultural reasons it damn well should be, and I, among many others, have been trying to make them at least since the days of Anthony Boucher and John W. Campbell. But I defy anyone to peruse the SF bookshelves and deny that such literarily ambitious and/or culturally aspirational science fiction is being drowned in such schlock, perhaps to extinction.

Or not?

Or maybe not quite exactly.

The dwindling cadre of writers serious about writing such speculative fiction who have been typed as “sci-fi” writers from the beginnings of their careers because genre lines were the only place they could get their work published may have missed the mainstream boat and remain ghettoized with the schlock. But more and more writers with “mainstream” reps who have never been ghettoized as genre hacks are taking to writing science fiction.

For top of the heap twenty-first century examples: John Updike, *Terrorist*; Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*; Cormac McCarthy, *The Road*. Margaret Atwood and Doris Lessing both have published more than enough speculative fiction novels to join the SFWA, and Lessing has not only been a Worldcon Guest of Honor, but wrote a science fiction novel series.

All of these writers and several other less prestigious official active members of the Literary Lions of America and

elsewhere who have tried their hands at writing speculative fiction are unquestionably masters of prose and characterization, if not always of plot and structure, which is to say story. But none of them have written speculative fiction on the level of, say, Philip K. Dick, Alfred Bester, Ian McDonald, Frank Herbert, Cordwainer Smith, and so forth when it comes to world-building, forward-looking vision, fully-rounded story structure bringing plot, character, and theme together in climactic epiphany—and, most notable by its absence, that elusive positive evolutionary vision known as sense of wonder.

Indeed, most mainstream science fiction from Huxley's *Brave New World* and Orwell's *1984* to the aforementioned titles and more have been post-apocalyptic dystopias. A long time ago—in these very pages, I do believe—I described the mission of the writer of science fiction as standing in the prow of a boat sailing on the sea of the present through the probability waves of the oncoming virtual futures to provide the macroculture with multiplex visions of what might or should or should not be actualized. Or something like that.

Call it sense of wonder, call it positive extrapolation, it's the thematic and spiritual core of much of the best speculative fiction, and most of the anointed Literary Lions who have tried their hand at writing speculative fiction just don't get it.

Why don't they get it?

Well, perhaps in large part because they don't know how to do it.

After all, if you've never written fiction set in the future, all you can have written is fiction set in the present in which you are writing it, or in the historical past, or fantasy, which is set in some disconnected never-was land.

You might be able to learn what thematically, literarily, and visionarily successful fiction is by reading it. But most of such novels written by experienced writers who know what it really is, know what they want to do and why, and are

masters in how to do it, have long since become golden needles published and buried in the odorous barnyard haystack of genre schlock.

Lowbrow stuff to disdain if you deem yourself a highbrow Literary Lion.

But as always, there are exceptions, not many maybe. William Burroughs might be the ultimate dystopian, but he knew his science fiction and learned how to write it. *Brave New World* might be a takedown of a species of utopia and primitive as science fiction, but Aldous Huxley went on to write both successful contemporary literary fiction and sophisticated and equally literarily successful mature science fiction. The same thing can be said of Anthony Burgess.

And who knows, in a few years, perhaps the same thing will be said of Gary Shteyngart.

Shteyngart's first novel, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, was, if not exactly tongue-out-of-cheek mimetic contemporary literary fiction, certainly not speculative fiction, let alone hard-core science fiction.

But his second novel, *Absurdistan*, more or less was a form of science fiction, of the humorous and mordant kind, which ignorant mainstream critics so often mislabel as "satire," à la Frederic Pohl and Cyril Kornbluth's *Space Merchants*, or much of the science fiction of Kurt Vonnegut both before and after his silly declarations that he never wrote the stuff.

The protagonist who in the end becomes a personage who might be justly deemed a sort of hero is the grossly fat Misha Vainberg. He is a Jewish Russian immigrant who starts in a contemporary New York masterfully and lovingly portrayed and ends up in the Absurdistan of the title, a nonexistent but somehow realistically portrayed newly independent Jewish republic of the former Soviet Union. This, too, is a funny novel, a sort of satire in a way, but this time in a more seriously imagined and created cultural milieu, and with a much more sophisticated and cynically, rather angry, political edge.

And *Absurdistan* is also an emotionally touching love story in the bargain.

And his third novel, praised in this very magazine by me, *Super Sad True Love Story*, is a seriously speculative science fiction novel, a sort of satire, a mainstreamlike Jewish family novel, a Korean family novel, and yes, also a kind of real love story, all masterfully and indeed lovingly delivered up in the same package.

Gary Shteyngart never published anything labeled as “SF,” “Science Fiction,” or “Speculative Fiction,” and from his very first novel, or anyway his second, became an accepted mainstream literary novelist, even as a kind of ethnic Jewish novelist. But from the very first, or certainly his second novel, Shteyngart’s fiction included enough of whatever elusive intellectual and emotional spirit that makes science fiction science fiction to be easily enough published in a genre SF line, had Shteyngart been so quixotically commercially self-destructive.

Gary Shteyngart is, well, *Gary Shteyngart*, the way Kurt Vonnegut was always *Kurt Vonnegut*, but without the need or impulse to wipe the SF stigma off his fancy literary bootheels. Shteyngart, like Vonnegut, at least in this early stage of his career, mixes speculative fiction with literary fiction like someone who doesn’t give a damn, a truly complete novelist, but with the warmth of heart that Vonnegut never really had or perhaps lost along his way.

And now this author of only three novels has had the amazing chutzpah to publish *Little Failure*—of all things, an autobiography! But a wonderful, humorous tale, not of his literary ascent to glory, but of his childhood into early manhood, without a hint of hubris in it, with admirably gentle and sometimes rueful self-deprecation, that reads like the very good novel it would be if it didn’t happen to be the truth.

And one of the truths that it reveals explains much about Gary Shteyngart’s unique literary trajectory. Yes, he was a student in a serious academic writing course. But before that he was a kid with

a subscription to . . . Isaac Asimov’s *Science Fiction Magazine*. Who dreamed of someday managing to publish a story here. One wonders what *his* story would have been if he had.

But thus far, there is really only one Gary Shteyngart, and in this alternate reality, most of the science fiction by mainstream eminences is set in the ruins of what they know. Any talented novelist can do that. You don’t really have to invent anything new. You need no evolutionary visionary imagination. You don’t have to *extrapolate*. You don’t even have to know what the word means. And while such settings can only be bummer settings, they don’t *have* to be bummer novels because a skilled and talented writer can create characters who transcend their environmental surround, even their own assholery, even their own evil deeds, and they do it all the time.

Okay, so that’s why mainstream writers tend to produce dystopias when they write science fiction, but it doesn’t explain why so many established Literary Lions have taken to doing it. And why writers of schlock SF are doing so much of it and so little of anything else.

And why even authors with mainstream literary ambitions are doing it too, and in *first* novels.

Peter Liney is an established British screenwriter with zero credentials as a science fiction novelist. *The Detainee* is his first novel. It is dystopian science fiction. It is not genre schlock. It is published in a science fiction line.

Adam Sternbergh has been the culture editor of the *New York Times Magazine* and an editor at *The New Yorker*. Not a mainstream novelist before the publication of *Shovel Ready*, his first novel, but certainly a bona fide cultural power in the highest mainstream circles. *Shovel Ready* is a dystopian science fiction novel. It is not published in a science fiction line, which is not surprising, given his editorial *pouvoir*. Nor is it surprising therefore that Sternbergh’s has gained *Shovel Ready* major positive mainstream literary attention.

Que pasa?

These two first novels are both dystopias, and not badly written, though *The Detainee*, having been written by Liney, who has had considerable experience writing fiction for television and radio, is unsurprisingly the better novel in terms of plot and dramatic structure, since Sternbergh had not, to my knowledge, written any fiction at all before *Shovel Ready*.

Shovel Ready is set in a fairly near-future New York that has been ravaged by a combination of the economic New Normal and a nuclear incident. The rich escape from this very down and very dirty street-level cityscape into their fantasyland virtual reality, and the proles are pretty much out of luck.

The hero, or rather the anti-hero protagonist, and mostly first-person narrator, is Spademan, one-time "garbage man," that is, sanitation worker. He is now a mercenary hitman for whoever pays him to dispose of their human garbage, mostly with his weapon of favor, the box cutter.

The Detainee is set in perhaps a somewhat more distant future, and entirely on an island offshore from an unnamed city where various economically useless people—dominantly the elderly and feral children and teenagers—are dumped, exiled, and quarantined, and left to their own devices. That is to say, the elderly are the perceived fun-and-games victims of the sadomasochistic teenage gangs and their almost equally savage kiddie wannabees.

This situation is maintained by the unseen powers that be by a system of satellites that observe the island during the day and enforce their rigid rules with precisely targeted laser weapons, preventing anyone from escaping and protecting the victims from the gangs during the day by killing anyone who violates them. During the day, anything not allowed is forbidden, and punishable by immediate death. At night, when the satellites are more or less blinded, it's the rule of the jungle, which is to say no rule

at all save that of physically strongest and amorally shittiest.

The hero and primary first person narrator of *The Detainee* is Big Guy Clancy, the detainee of the title. And though he is an aged-out mafioso hit man and bodyguard, he is indeed a hero in this novel, though physically not the strongman that he was, and considering himself not very smart and strictly muscle, a protector of who he can when he can.

Okay, neither Liney nor Sternbergh has previously written non-media science fiction. Liney's background is show biz writing, his first novel is straightforward science fiction and published in a genre SF line. Sternbergh had never written fiction before at all, but has been and still is a journalistic and editorial power within the New York literary establishment, which explains why *Shovel Ready* has been published as a major mainstream novel and received widespread critical attention and fulsome praise.

This explains why these two rather similar dystopian science fiction novels have been published so differently. And, indeed, the genre SF racks are full of such novels of widely varying literary quality. While one might bemoan the injustice, one should hardly be surprised.

But *Shovel Ready* and *The Detainee* have something in common that I at least find befuddling, and at worst appalling. They are first novels that one way or the other are deliberately designed to launch *novel series*!

The Detainee is subtler and more tentative about it, and so is its publisher. Big Guy grows in moral and characterological stature and regains physical strength slowly stepwise, finds both a love, and a newfound ability to love, and becomes the leader of a successful escape from the island. Thus the ending of the novel is a dramatically satisfying thematic, characterological, and story climax. But at the end, the fleeing refugees are headed for the unknown mainland, and a possible sequel or even the beginning of a novel series. . . .

Adam Sternbergh and his publisher, however, declare it openly. “He . . . is at work on a second Spademan novel.” So proclaims the back cover flap on the first one as it is being published!

I do believe that the classical Greeks had a word for it.

The word is *hubris*.

Okay, Liney writes a first novel with a literarily proper closure but leaves an opening for a possible sequel if his publisher should find it commercially viable, but Sternbergh and his publisher openly announce a forthcoming second “Spademan novel” on the cover of the first novel. They don’t just launch the author’s first novel; they are openly launching a franchise.

Adam Sternbergh has never written fiction before, and doesn’t seem to know much more about science fiction than what he may have seen in the cinematic SF franchises. He does write well, and Spademan is a pretty interesting character—a hitman, if not with a heart of gold, at least one made of protoplasm. But his dystopian New York, though well-rendered by Sternbergh’s stylistic skill and knowledge of the city, is nothing very new, is rather generic, and so too is his concept of virtual reality.

Which is not to say that a Spademan novel series can’t succeed. Maybe it can—the genre SF racks are full of similar ongoing genre series, many of them written by writers without Adam Sternbergh’s level of sheer literary skill. But Spademan is the sort of character who would be much better placed in a crime novel or very hard-boiled detective series. That seems to be Sternbergh’s literary strength and knowledgeable metier. Science fiction is not.

Maybe it could be, if he set out to learn how to make it so. He certainly has the prose-writing chops. He certainly knows how to create believable, interesting, and even unique characters. His skill with storytelling inventiveness could be evolved. *Shovel Ready* is a pretty good first novel. It’s even a pretty good SF novel. That’s nothing to be ashamed of;

it’s what an old joke calls a hundred lawyers at the bottom of the sea—a good start.

But *Shovel Ready* has not been published and reviewed the way it has because of what *it* is but because of *who* Adam Sternbergh is. That is nothing to really be ashamed of, either. That is good fortune, and he would have been a naïve fool not to take advantage of it. However, committing to the creation of a Spademan franchise with a first novel because you can get away with it is not only hubris, but also selling oneself short as a promising first novelist. This is no way to evolve as a literary artist. This is not even a good way to learn the craft.

One can see why the author of a first science fiction novel like Peter Liney would write a dystopia, and also why he would conclude it in a way that leaves the door open for a sequel, or perhaps even a franchise. By choice or probably by necessity, given what *The Detainee* is and where Liney is coming from, it more or less belongs in a genre SF line. And this is not a put-down, for all too many accomplished and established authors of science fiction are doing much the same thing.

Commercially, it’s not merely a smart move, it’s becoming the *only* smart move, as witness how many such series are dominating the dwindling non-fantasy share of the SF racks. At least the author of *The Detainee* has taken pains to make it a successful stand-alone novel, and his publisher, who has not proclaimed it the first novel of a franchise launch, is content at this point to merely leave the possibility open.

But why would someone in the pragmatic position of Adam Sternbergh, who could publish any decently written first novel as a major mainstream publication, as proven by the success of *Shovel Ready*, choose to launch his career as a novelist with a dystopian science fiction novel and get to work on an announced Spademan franchise before it was even published?

Perhaps choosing to launch his career with a novel franchise was an economic decision even if Sternbergh has been able to avoid genre publication. And perhaps, judging from the nature of his franchised character, he's thinking of the Spademan novel series as more akin to hard-boiled cynical detective franchises where the personality of the recurring character is the main attraction, not the story—and, as often as not, not really a uniquely invented setting.

But why Adam Sternbergh chose to write a dystopian post-apocalyptic science fiction novel, I believe, probably has literary and macrocultural reasons. There are obviously very good reasons why novelists with strong mainstream connections who could do so would prefer to publish their science fiction novels outside the genre ghetto.

That's an obvious career choice that I have long tried to make myself with some of my novels as far back as *Bug Jack Barron* in the 1960s when it was much less possible, and therefore without much success. I've been doing it more recently in France, and I would dearly like to do it in the United States now were I not stereotyped as a "sci-fi" guy. I surely am not the only writer in the same position.

Why mainstream writers who turn their hands to writing science fiction so often write near-future post-apocalyptic dystopias at least in their first efforts is easy to understand, too. More often than not, that's what they know how to do, destroy present day settings they know quite well, and set their stories in the ruins.

Whether they will evolve and broaden their speculative horizons if they continue to write literary speculative fiction remains to be seen, but I have my fearful doubts. Because all too many far more experienced and knowledgeable writers of speculative fiction published within the genre lines are doing the same thing too.

So it's difficult to turn a blind eye to the unfortunate macrocultural reasons.

Something vital seems to be leaching out of at least so-called advanced globalized civilization (a/k/a "the West") and perhaps human civilization as a whole—a positive vision of an evolving rather than devolving future.

Disastrous climate change. The so-called New Normal economy of growing economic inequality and the destruction of the middle class in America and Europe. Technologically based high unemployment and wage squeezes. Paralyzed democratic governments and the erosion of public confidence in the democratic process itself. The rise of neo-Nazism. Jihad. Failed nation states. Ruinously expensive higher education in the United States. Murderous drug cartels.

Somehow, Dorothy, I don't think we're living in the Golden Age of Human Civilization. Do you?

And the media—films, television, video games, the news sites whether on paper or digital—rather than offering up visionary hope, are generally feeding the bumper weltanschauung by marketing into it. Including literature in general. Nor is science fiction immune. It's a vicious circle. It's a downward spiral.

No, I am not advocating the writing of sappy utopias. I wouldn't know how to write a dramatically successful story set in a perfect utopia, I haven't read anything that does it, and I don't believe it's possible.

But I am sure that it is possible to write dramatically and visionarily successful stories set in futures that, however imperfect, are on balance more to be desired than the present within which the author is writing them. I know this for a fact, and so do you, for hundreds of writers have been writing hundreds if not thousands of them for over a century.

And knowing this has at least encouraged me to try to do it myself and continue to do it. The sincere and sincerely serious writer of speculative fiction has two macrocultural missions. One is to literally trash what needs trashing, and there is

plenty of that in current pop and high-brow culture, emphatically including speculative fiction and a fair share of my own fiction. But the other is to stand in the prow of that boat of the probability waves sailing through the fog of ongoing virtual futures and try to offer up visions of better possible futures, and not just dire warnings.

I do believe that you believe this if you are reading this magazine.

Why would I be writing it here and now if I didn't believe it too?

But why, you may well ask, and so do I, has this sort of visionary science fiction become an endangered species? Why are dystopian novels and novel franchises crowding it off the genre SF racks? Why are most successful mainstream writers who turn their hands to writing speculative fiction emulating the same sort of thing?

Why has at least the American public and probably the entire "Western" public generally lost interest in, or indeed belief in, the probability or even the possibility of the positive evolution of technologically advancing human civilization? Why has the dominant weltanschauung of film, television, literature, video games, comic books, become retro on the one hand and post-apocalyptic dystopia on the other? Why is there even so much questioning of Winston Churchill's declaration that "Democracy is the worst form of government excepting all the others"?

Which came first, the chicken or the egg?

Or did neither? Or both? At the same time?

Publishers, movie studios, TV producers, and so forth would no doubt declare that they are following market forces, not creating them, marketing what the ratings are telling them the customers want in the service of the sacred bottom line.

Curmudgeonly literary and cultural critics such as myself would declare that the dying away of literature, film, television, and so forth telling

dramatically satisfying stories with forward-looking visionary thematic viewpoints is depriving the public at large of even knowledge of, let alone belief in, the possibility of such a mode of consciousness.

Alas, cannot both be right? Is not the ultimate point that however it got started, this is a negative feedback loop, an Ouroboros gobbling itself up by the tail to its vanishing point? "The people know what the people understand," Jim Morrison sang, but maybe he got it backward. Maybe the people can hardly be expected to understand what they don't even know.

No, Dorothy, we are not living in the Golden Age of Human Civilization. But we most certainly are living in the Golden Age of Astronomy. We now know that there are probably more planets in this galaxy than there are stars. We have now detected planets in the so-called Goldilocks Zone where water would be liquid. The estimate now is that there are *seventeen billion* such planets in this galaxy alone. The notion that we are alone in the galaxy now appears to be utterly ridiculous.

This has yet to penetrate the broad public consciousness. But when another biosphere is detected out there—and the instrumentation to do so is already being constructed—it certainly will. And that will be by far the second greatest and most drastic event in human history. The only event that can supersede it will be the detection of another civilization out there. And given seventeen billion chances it's hard to see how there can fail to be one. Indeed, not one, but thousands, hundreds of thousands, perhaps even *millions* of them.

Millions of civilizations. Knowing that they are there. But perhaps having no means of ever reaching any of them or them reaching us. No way of even really having a meaningful conversation. And I predict that this is going to be our reality within the lifetimes of people already born. I can even believe that at my

advanced age I just might be around to be there.

This, Dorothy, is going to be the Golden Age of Science Fiction, and it would seem as if it must last as long as humanity. For this is going to be an eternal present that can never be confronted literarily without SF. For this is going to be a civilization whose culture and literary

core can only be eternal unresolved and unresolvable speculation.

The people will know this.

It's going to be the job of writers of speculative fiction to make them understand.

Tall task, isn't it?

Difficult as it's going to be, maybe we should try to get started now. ○

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Easter is the first weekend in April—a big weekend for conventions worldwide. My picks then are NorwesCon, MiniCon, and the UK and New Zealand National Cons. Till then try AggieCon, MidSouthCon, MillenniCon. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of our con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

MARCH 2015

- 20–22—MidSouthCon. For info, write: Box 17724, Memphis TN 38187. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) www.midsouthcon.org. (E-mail) info@midsouthcon.org. Con will be held in: Memphis TN (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Memphis Hilton. Guests will include: Cory Doctorow, artist Melissa Gay, editor Elizabeth Donald. General SF/fantasy/horror convention.
- 20–22—MillenniCon. www.millennicon.org. Cincinnati OH. Laura Resnick, artist Daniel Cortopassi. General SF/fantasy/horror convention.
- 20–22—CoastCon. www.coastcon.org. Gulf Coast Coliseum and Convention Center, Biloxi MS. Gaming, SF, fantasy and horror convention.
- 21—ImagiCon. www.imagicon.nl. Reehorst, Netherlands. Theme: "Leave It to Your Imagination." SF, comics, horror, fantasy.
- 26–29—AggieCon. <http://cephvar.tamu.edu/aggiecon>. Hilton, College Station TX. A general SF, fantasy and horror convention.
- 27–29—ConBust. <http://sophia.smith.edu/conbust>. Smith College, Northampton MA. Focus on female members of the participating community.
- 27–29—Corflu. corflu32@gmail.com. Newcastle/Tyne UK. For fans of fanzines, especially old-time ones produced by mimeograph.
- 27–29—EyeCon. www.eyeconfla.com. Wilmington NC. Chad Michael Murray, Lee Norris, Tyler Hilton. One Tree Hill TV show. Vampires, etc.
- 27–29—Anime Detour. www.animatedetour.com. Doubletree by Hilton, Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Jessica Calvello, Josh Grelle, T. Oliver.
- 28—Otaku Fest. www.otaku-fest.webs.com. Centennial High School, Ellicott City (Baltimore) MD. Anime.
- 28–29—Conference on Middle Earth. www.3rdcome.org. Western Mass. The Lord of the Rings, and other works of J. R. R. Tolkien.
- 28–29—LuxCon. www.luxcon.lu. Schungfabrik, Tetange, Luxembourg. Festival of the Fantastic.

APRIL 2015

- 1–3—Contact Conference. www.contact-conference.org. San Francisco CA area. Search for extra-terrestrial intelligence.
- 2–5—Norwescon, Box 68547, Seattle WA 98168. (206) 230-7850. www.norwescon.org. Seattle WA. George R. R. Martin, Boris Vallejo.
- 2–5—MiniCon, Box 8297, Minneapolis MN 55408. www.mnssf.org. Bloomington (Minneapolis) MN. Larry Niven, Jane Yolen, Tom Doherty.
- 3–5—ConGlomeration. www.conglomeration.info. Louisville KY. Artist Molly Harper, artist Cynthia Sheppard. Multi-media, SF, fantasy.
- 3–5—Anime Boston. www.animeboston.com. Sheraton Boston Hotel, Boston MA. Tens of thousands expected.
- 3–5—Anime Conji. www.animeconji.org. Sheraton Hotel and Marina, San Diego CA.
- 3–5—Anime Matsuri. www.animematsuri.com. George R. Brown Convention Center, Houston TX.
- 3–5—Middle Tennessee Anime Con. www.mtac.net. Sheraton Airport, Nashville TN. J. Michael Tatum, Junko Fujiyama, Marianne Miller.
- 3–6—UK Nat'l. Con. www.dysprosium.org.uk. Park Inn, Heathrow (London) UK. Jim Butcher, Seanan McGuire (Mira Grant), Caroline Mullan.
- 3–6—New Zealand Nat'l. Con, Box 10104, Wellington 6143, NZ. www.timelord2067.com. Sudima Lake Hotel, Rotorua NZ. Gail Carriger.
- 9–12—Furry Weekend. www.furryweekend.com. Atlanta GA. Theme: "Shangri-la: The Forgotten Orient." Anthropomorphics.
- 10–12—Ad Astra, Box 7276, Toronto ON M5W 1X9. www.ad-astra.org. Toronto ON. Anne Bishop, Charles deLint, Maryann Harris.
- 10–12—OdysseyCon, Box 7114, Madison WI 53707. www.odysseycon.org. Madison WI. Heather Brewer, Jonathan Maberry, Matt Forbeck.
- 10–12—221B Con. www.221bcon.com. Marriott Perimeter Center, Atlanta GA. Gareth David-Lloyd, Ben Snyder. For Sherlock Holmes fans.
- 11–12—Hal-Con. www.hal-con.net. Kanagawa (Tokyo) Japan. Hannu Rajaniemi, Noriko Nagano. Promoting a WorldCon in Japan.
- 16–19—FILKONtario, 145 Rice Ave. #98, Hamilton ON L9C 6R3. www.filkontario.ca. Mississauga (Toronto) ON. SF/fantasy folksinging.
- 17–19—JordanCon. www.jordancon.org. Marriott Perimeter Center, Atlanta GA. Saladin Ahmed, Todd Lockwood. Works of Robert Jordan.
- 17–19—PortmeirCon, 871 Clover Dr., N. Wales PA 19459. www.portmeircon.com. Portmeirion UK. Where TV show "The Prisoner" filmed.

AUGUST 2015

- 19–23—Sasquan, PMB 208, 15127 Main St. E., Suite 104, Sumner WA 98390. <http://sasquan.org>. Spokane WA. Gerrold. WorldCon. \$190.

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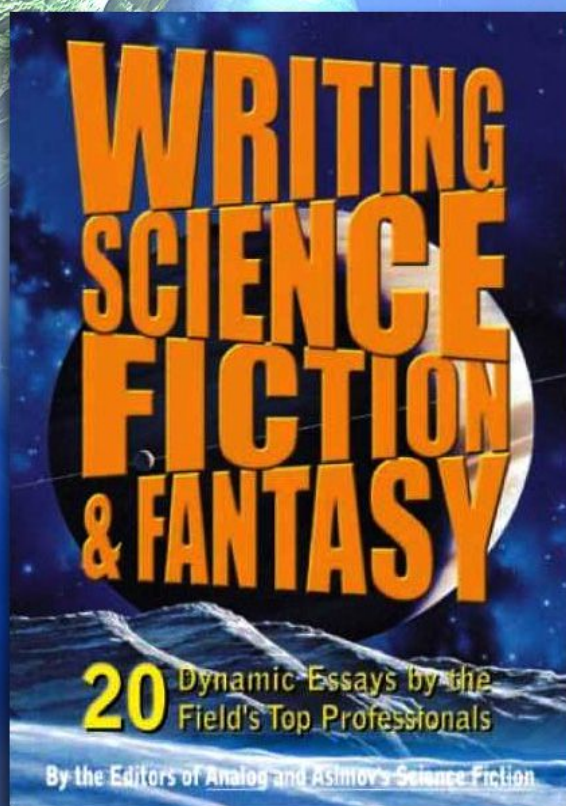
- 17–21—MidAmeriCon II. www.midamericon2.org. Convention Center and Bartle Hall, Kansas City MO. Kinuko Y. Craft. WorldCon. \$150.

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